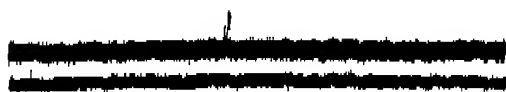


INDIAN RAIN



By the same Author

Dora Beddoe

WINIFRED BLAZEY

Indian Rain



MICHAEL JOSEPH LTD.
17 & 18, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.2

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1938

*Set and printed in Great Britain by William Brendon & Son.
Ltd., at the Mayflower Press, Plymouth, in Baskerville type,
eleven point, leaded, on a toned antique-wove paper made by
John Dickinson, and bound by James Burn.*

To

STEPHEN HOCKABY

Chapter One



GLIMMERING GHOSTLIKE AGAINST THE DARK BRANCHES of the cedar, Margaret waited, and watched the lighted room. The curtains were drawn across the long window, so that all she saw was with the mind's eye, that truthful, undazzled watcher that can see in daylight or dark with equal clarity of vision.

She could see Sir William, a trifle stiff with the rheumatism which took all the dwellers in the house by the time they were in their late forties, and Alice, his wife, sharp-featured, saturnine and clever. Alice Cleave, said her detractors, showed clearly her Portugal blood, although three generations lay between her and the bride who had been brought home one winter from Lisbon.

The long window remained closed, but the garden door opened, and Margaret drew nearer to the great, dark, branching tree. Lovat Cleave, for whom she had been waiting, shut the door and sprinted across the smooth lawn to meet her, guided by her glimmering dress. They stepped behind a bough which swept the ground.

"It is no good, Peg. I have to go."

"And how is the wounded keeper?"

"Mending."

"Does he hate you? Is he going to tell?"

"My father says not. They fired first, you know."

"Does the keeper admit it?"

"It makes no difference. We were in the wrong—poaching and trespassing and blacking our faces."

"It was only a boy's trick. You didn't mean any harm."

"Oh, but we did. And I'm twenty now, don't forget. Old enough to be hanged or transported." He laughed. It had been a relief, that morning, to be assured that the keeper was not going to die after all.

"And must you really go? And what shall I do when you're gone?" She could not see his face, and felt for the warmth of his coat.

"I'll come back, Peg. I'll soon make a fortune. People do, out there with the Company, and, when they return, whatever wrong they've done is soon forgiven them, because, you see, they're rich."

"But you may be killed. Aren't there wild men and wild beasts?"

"I don't know. Tigers, perhaps, and elephants. But it won't be amusing like that. My father says I shall keep a book and learn huckstering—a new thing for one of our family." He laughed again. They walked over the lawn to the smooth lake, placid and dark. The water was dimly mysterious, and the path that led past the willows and under the oaks and the elms seemed longer by night than by day. Lovat put his arm round Margaret's waist. They halted and kissed at the top of the path through the woods.

"I don't want you to go," she said, "but if you must—and I suppose you must—promise to come back soon."

"Yes, soon, Peg; ever so soon. Wait for me, won't you? Remember what you promised."

They turned by the southward fringe of the lake and walked down the steep little path to the wooded valley through which flowed the quiet river. They halted again on the bridge, and stood there looking at the water.

"It gets muddy further on," said Lovat at last. "Come up to the house, Peg, will you?"

"Not to-night. I can't meet your father to-night."

"You mustn't be angry with Father, Peg."

"But he had it in his power not to let you go. And your mother could have prevented him from sending you away. It would have been so easy."

"You don't understand."

"I won't come, anyway, Lovat. But I'll wait for you—I'll wait——" She was crying. He put his arms round her, kissed her again, took her hand, and led her back to the edge of the lake. The path was winding and rough. The dark water gleamed. High in the night sky the clouds hung like ragged, dispensable garments, and above and beyond them the stars shone with intense and hopeful radiance.

The Cleaves and the Royatts were neighbours. Lovat took Margaret home, and waited until she had slipped in by the side door and the candle-light shone in the window above the topmost tendrils of the creeper which covered the front of the house. Then he turned and raced back to his home. He pushed open the garden door and walked through the dining-room, up the first flight of stairs, past the carved wooden lions on the banisters, the coloured shields with their quarterings, the staircase window beneath which, all night long from sunset until old Jowey got up in the morning, a lamp burnt, throwing up sombrely, but in

colour, the arms of the Cleaves and the Morfreys painted thickly upon the thick glass.

His father and mother were in the long gallery, in front of the enormous Tudor fire-place. Sir William said nothing to his son, but stood firmly planted, an oak-tree of a man who did not care for this boy who was so little like himself. He was sternly and solemnly smoking, his feet apart, his right hand fingering the long thin stem of his pipe, his left stretched out to the warmth of the flaring logs.

Alice Cleave looked at her son.

"Has Margaret gone?" she asked gently.

Lovat nodded, went over to one of the windows—they were uncurtained—knelt with one knee on the wooden window-seat and stared out over the park.

"Bence wrote to-day," said his father. "He thinks you can stand the climate."

Lovat turned and stared at his father.

"The climate?" he said. "Yes, Father, of course I can."

Nothing more was said for the next half-hour. Lovat came over to the fire, sat down and stared at the portraits of his Portuguese relations. Some of them, he knew, had lived in India. Sometimes he glanced at his mother, and sometimes at the ornately decorated ceiling. The Cleaves were proud of the long gallery. It was a magnificent room, and what they called the "new work" in it dated from the end of James I's reign.

A servant brought in Sir William's good-night drink. Alice Cleave rose, and her son went to open the door. She drew him outside with her and together they went up the stairs.

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"She's promised to wait for me, Mother. Mother, be good to her, please."

Alice Cleave squeezed her son's arm. Her daughters took after their father, big, fair, square-looking, rosy girls, courageous, forthright, stupid, obstinate and good-hearted. Lovat was all her own—thin, dark, imaginative, too much the prey of his fancies to be a hero.

"You're sure you want her to wait for you?" she said. He did not answer. She sighed and then laughed, and led him into her room. She took from an ivory box a crucifix.

"It has been to India. My people were in Goa. It will protect you," she said. Her dark face was sallow with ill-health. Lovat took the crucifix, but she took it back again and put its thin silver chain about his neck and slipped the little cross in the opening of his shirt. He could feel it cold on his body, and the chain seemed to prick against the short nape hairs of his neck.

Alice Cleave kissed her son.

"Your father is sorry he made the arrangements. You need not go, I believe. Son, what do you say?"

But Lovat Cleave wanted to go. He was conscious, suddenly, of wanting to do nothing else. Wild men and wild beasts, Peg had said. He cherished the words, thinking more of adventure than of her. Imagination stirred him. He was highly-strung, not heroic.

"Mr. Bence will expect me," he said. His mother smiled, and touched his cheek, and they went up the stairs together to the room he had had since his babyhood.

Chapter Two



THE SEA-SICKNESS FROM WHICH HE HAD SUFFERED, AND during whose course he had more than once thought he should die, was over and almost forgotten within four days. The deck was slippery with rain, and the tireless waters, everlastingly surging green, canted the ship with every rolling billow. So it would be, he supposed, until they reached the river-mouth of the Hooghly and sailed up-stream to the factory. He stood in the bows whilst the wind tore past and the heavy clouds drooped lower, and watched the green swing of the waters and the crazy mopping and mowing of the sails outspread against the sky. The ship was small and clumsy. Sixteen weeks stretched ahead, strange landings, pirates, storms.

At nights he slept in a cot built on to the side of the vessel. Low rafters, from which a lantern hung, sweating wooden walls which creaked and squealed whenever the seas were high, and a smell of cheese, apples, bilge and rats, were the most definite reminders, if ever he lay awake, that his bed was made where space was limited and danger always near.

When the hot weather came he slept in the long bright hours of the middle day, and walked the deck in the very early morning and then again at night. Large stars swung then about the masthead; the

ship, in spite of her clumsy build, appeared to move more easily and with zest.

The nights were short ; the days very long, with brilliant, unbearable sun. Sometimes a haze came over the waters, but only the haze of humid heat in which the ship's company and her twenty passengers cursed and stickily sweated. Below decks or above, it was all the same. There was no ease anywhere. The sailors, in their spells off duty, lay about, taking it in turns to sluice one another with buckets of tepid sea-water. The officers, too lazy to be brutal, played at gambling games with the passengers or lay naked on their bunks until their watch came round.

The passengers were merchant adventurers ; at least, were called so. Lovat was in the nominal charge of one of them, an agent of the Company returning to Bengal after having made a report in London upon the advisability of fortifying Job Charnock's new settlement against Maratha raids. The agent was a thin, dry, yellow-checked man, short-tempered, and shivering with ague. From his tart conversation Lovat gathered that India was indeed a land of riches, and that such as could resist the climate, and the other indigenous ills there, could depend upon taking home a fortune. They talked a good deal, for the voyage lasted more than four months, and by the time the ship made the mouth of the Hooghly River amid wastes of sub-tropical swamps and slowly sailed up the channel, the young man believed that he had a fair notion of the way in which money was to be made. He lay in his bunk and planned the spending of it. There were horses to buy ; then, he thought, they could have some swans on the lake. He wanted

to build an observation tower in the grounds ; he had often looked up at the old water-tower and wished it were a pagoda. The girls would want dresses and dowries. His father was not a wealthy man. The family fortunes, such as they were, had gone in the Civil Wars, and the Restoration had not enabled the Cleaves, at any rate, to recoup themselves.

The ship, as he sprawled and dreamed and mused, sailed on. The mud-flats and dense green jungle gave way, more frequently, to villages, but Job Charnock's new settlement lay many miles up-stream, and as the ship sailed on she was surrounded by the muddy, inland waters, rich with silt from the plains. For days there was nothing to be seen except the slow flight of many-plumaged birds, but when the channel narrowed, the dank swamps, green, and smelling of rotted vegetation and that further, indefinable stench of alligators and malaria, closed in upon the ship, foetid, unwholesome and, after the first sight, dreary.

At last a few huts along the marginal clearance at the river's edge, and some larger buildings behind them, the steps to the water from Kali's temple, and the spectacle of boats and bathing Indians, argued the presence of the factory. Lovat, intrigued and excited, never left the bulwarks of the ship. The endless-seeming voyage was almost over. Impatiently he awaited the anchoring of the ship, and, leaning over the side, his eyes screwed up against the sun, he surveyed the Company's settlement.

The site of the villages of Sutanati and Kalikata presented to English eyes a less prepossessing appearance than did any other of the Company's possessions. Pressed upon by the jungle and the river marshes,

malodorous and malarial, humid with steamy heat and desolate with mud, the two little villages, situated on ground slightly higher than the surrounding river flats, gave on to an expanse of delta forest and the deadly river greenery. Alligators haunted the swamps and tigers the up-country jungle, and of the villages themselves, stuck on their mudbanks as though the mud itself kept the wretched little hovels clinging to the soft, wet soil, one was a cotton market and the other a blood-beguiled shrine.

The Company's factory, like the native huts, was mud-walled and thatched, and Lovat's first glimpse of it hardened in him a determination, which he had conceived upon leaving England, to see as little of it, inside or out, as he could manage. His work, he discovered, was to keep accounts, check stores, arrange for lading, keep a tally of freights, bully the Indian middle-men and play at cards in the evening. Cards were the only social distraction, except for heavy drinking, that the English settlement afforded. Lovat, young and adaptable, soon settled down. The little English colony, he discovered, were as restricted in their interests, as much the servants of convention, as much aware of social distinctions as the people he had left behind him in England. The settlement, in fact, was England in miniature.

Lovat's chief interest centred in the Indians. There was his servant, who belonged to a Sudra caste, born to labour, cut off from the priesthood, military prestige or even money-making ; born to service ; low-caste ; not untouchable, and permitted to offer water, although never food, to a Brahmin. He might pay for a Brahmin's food, but might not give it to him personally.

He did not talk to Lovat ; he giggled with nervousness and bashfulness whenever Lovat tried to talk to him ; he was married, although he was only fifteen, and he had an infant son of whom he was very proud.

The Indians took to Lovat because he was young and unprejudiced. They all giggled, either nervously or to show astonishment, at his doings and sayings, and at first he found their thoughts, actions and language entirely unintelligible. Older men in the settlement warned him to leave them alone ; said that they were dishonest, dirty and depraved. Lovat, accustomed to English villages, thought them merely interesting and childish.

"What is Kali?" he said to a young Brahmin from whom he was learning Bengali. The youth—he was six months younger than Lovat—replied :

"Kali is a goddess. She is Parbati by her name of cruelty. She has *great* power."

"And who is Parbati, then?"

"Parbati is the earth. Before she is reborn, she is Sati. Who is Sati?" He forestalled Lovat by asking the question himself, his full lips laughing, his dark eyes liquid with friendship and admiration. He was learning English very much more rapidly than Lovat could acquire Bengali.

"Yes, go on, then. Who is she?"

"She is the wife of Shiva, and Shiva is God. What *you* call God. He can preserve and he can destroy. That is God, is it not? God is three—so *your* priests say, too—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva."

"I see. What happened to Sati?"

"I have *no* objection to tell you this. Her father has offended Shiva, and so Sati dies of grief, as a

good wife, you see? Then Shiva is afflicted. He goes himself to parts——”

“Apart.”

“Apart. *Many* thanks. And thinks *very* deeply because he is so sad. And then nothing can be born. Everything stands *quite* still.”

“I see. So Sati is born again, and is called Parbati, the earth. And then, I suppose, Shiva is pleased?”

“She cannot wake him from his thought. His thought is *so* deep. It is not until Gajasura threatens her that Shiva can be roused. Parbati calls upon Shiva. The elephant-demon is *very* powerful. He fights against Shiva. Everything is trembling. They fight with the winds and the lightning—with everything. Then Vishnu gives Shiva a club, and he kills Gajasura. Then he goes back to his thoughts, and Parbati begins her unhappiness—I do not know how to tell you. How do you say it in English, when one has made a *bad* fault and it is the wish to show great sorrow?”

“Penance,” said Lovat. “But what about Kali?”

“You understand that the earth is cruel, sometimes? And that people must die?” His brilliant eyes met those of the English boy. He had taken off his turban and his long hair flowed to his shoulders.

“Yes, I think I understand. You stay a bit, Dabindra. My boy can bring us some food. I’d like to hear some more. It’s very interesting.” He shook back his own brown hair which he wore instead of a peruke.

The Brahmin smiled, and courteously spread out his hands.

"It is so sad. I cannot eat with you. From your servant I can take water, not food. His caste is of the Jalacharaniya-Sudras. If he belonged to one of the Jalabyaba-harya-Sudra castes I could not even take water. That also I will explain one day if you wish. Our thoughts on these subjects are very *old* thoughts, very important. I will tell you. I like *very* much to tell you."

Lal, the servant, bowed humbly to him as he passed. Dabindra airily bestowed on him the benediction which a Brahmin will give in place of a salutation to an Indian of lower caste. Lal sat like an image when Dabindra had gone, and did not offer to stir until Lovat called him. He was darker-skinned than Dabindra and not nearly as handsome, a silent, shy creature, very anxious to please. When Lovat called him, he entered, folded his arms and bowed, then stood with his chin on his chest, his eyes looking modestly down, and waited for orders.

How he spent the hours between six in the morning, when Lovat began his day's work in the Company's service, and noon, when the work at the factory was over for the day, Lovat did not know. But he could always be found squatting, silent and watchful, in the doorway of Lovat's sleeping quarters, until his master entered. Then he would vanish, to reappear like a shadow as soon as he was called. His patience was limitless, his ability to squat about and do nothing whatever was equally unbounded.

Lovat paid his wages—about one and sixpence a week—out of his own small salary and the extra money that he made from private trading. The Company paid their agents a mere retaining fee—

Lovat's was a few pounds a year and would increase with the length of his service. The inducement to remain in India was not the salary paid by the Company, but the opportunity for private trading which it offered to all its servants. Lovat, however, showed little aptitude for trading. It did not interest him. He found it an ungentlemanly calling, and he made acquaintance of Indians to study them, not to fleece them, a point of view which the English settlement found novel but suspect, and against which they continued to warn the young man.

But apart from the Indians—and of them and their ways he could not get to know as much as he wished, for the poor were shy, and the rigorous system of caste, with its ceremonial purities and pollutions, and purdah, with its complete absence of what the West understands of social intercourse, made obstacles between Lovat and the wealthier Indians—life was exceedingly dull. Some of the English traders had their wives with them; some had taken low-caste native wives. A boy just out of his teen slacked companionship and looked about for adventure. Both Lal and Dabindra were married—had been married for years—and in the English settlement the only other bachelor was the yellow-cheeked agent in whose company Lovat had travelled out from England. The first ship brought letters. He read and re-read them until the paper they were written on was brown and in places worn through to holes. The feeling of homesickness grew intense. He went off his food, made some serious mistakes in his accounts, kicked an Indian porter, struck his servant when he did not immediately comprehend an order, insulted two Englishmen

of his father's age, got drunk and was sick, and took his gun into the swamps one day to shoot himself, but came back with some birds instead.

The agent, sympathetic in spite of his bad-tempered manner, sent for him and proposed a journey up-country immediately the rains were over.

"But they haven't begun," said Lovat, with ungraciousness amounting to discourtesy. They began on the following Sunday. For days the Indians had talked of the rains, prayed for the rains; the young girls had danced to induce rain, sacrifices had been made for rain; temple bells rang, festivals were held, a fair, in front of the temple, went on for four or five days (and kept the settlement busy, for the middlemen came down to it, and therefore to the factory, by the half-dozen), and trade, as though it were an animate thing conscious that the rains would make it inoperative for weeks, flared into noisy activity.

The rains, when they came, were the heavy, ceaseless outpourings of heaven. Day after day it rained. The earth was drowned, and threw up despairing steam. The jungle was a sea of swimming green in which nothing could be particularised but colour. The brown river rose and rose.

Then the rains ceased. They were intermittent between May and December. The floods subsided slowly. The clouds hung, heavy still, over the settlement for a day or two, but, when the river ran smoothly again, along came the produce to the factory.

The heavy, wet summer heat was exceptionally trying. Lovat, soaked with sweat, could not sleep

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at night for the heat, would not eat, and, but for scandalising the settlement—a feat all too easy of accomplishment, he discovered—would have taken to Indian dress and lived in dhoti and turban, as he did in the hermitage of his quarters.

Chapter Three



MORE WOMEN CAME ON THE NEXT SHIP, AND A COUPLE of letters from home. The farms, said his father, were suffering from want of water. Lovat thought of the turgid Hooghly and its tributaries, and of all the secret streams, which, the older merchants said, watered the land from the river delta to the hills. The fruit, said his mother, had set well, and the spaniel bitch had had her seventh litter by Mr. Hargreave's Prince—Lovat would remember Prince?—and that little Clytie had named one of the puppies Kalikata, after the Company's village.

Three women had come out on the ship. Escorting them was a thin young man, five or six years older than Lovat, who had got into debt in England and was hoping to recoup himself in India. He proved to be the nephew of one of the ladies. The other lady was in charge of a girl of fourteen, a snub-nosed, lively girl whom Lovat liked because she reminded him of Clytie, his younger sister. She told him that she had been sent out to India to her father because her aunts in England could not manage her.

They talked and laughed together, and Lovat took her and the other ladies to the landing stage, when the ship was going off again, so that they might watch the departure of the vessel as she cast off her moorings and took off grandly with sails spread, laden

with produce for England. The nephew, Henry Palton, did not accompany the party. He was a taciturn, conceited young man, contemptuous of Lovat, whom he regarded as a boy, irritable because of the heat, suspicious of and overbearing towards Indians, and as anxious to make money and return to England as were almost all the rest of the Company's agents. Lovat disliked him at sight, and never found any occasion to modify his first impressions of him.

But with the young girl he became fast friends. Accustomed to amuse and protect his sisters, he found in this child's companionship something which he had been missing in India, even in Dabindra's society. He began to be made welcome at her father's table, and soon it became the custom for him to dine there. He amused the girl with stories of the Indians and their ways. He recommended a woman to her as servant.

"She is clean and a good worker. She is widowed, but is not of the kind for suttee. Her people would like to be rid of her. They are ashamed of her because her husband died."

The merchant looked at him, pausing in the act of filling a long pipe.

"You should try your fortune up-country, my boy," he said. "Keep to the river, or the big trade routes, and do not lose touch, of course, with our connections. There are plenty of villages which would offer a good return in bartered goods."

"I should need to go pretty far north, sir, I believe. We're established at Hooghly, and the French are at Chandernagore."

He thought it over, and began to buy, from the

ships as they anchored off the settlement, goods for up-country sale. He rented a thatched hovel in which to store them, borrowed from the Indian money-lenders, at ruinous rates of interest, to buy more goods than he himself had the capital to buy, was scolded by the agent for being a short-sighted fool, watched the thatched hut filling, rented another, listened to the talk of men in the village market and the wild tales of English adventurers who had had too much to drink, and then, on his twenty-first birthday, he chartered two biggish boats, got porters to load them up, and vanished from ken for four months.

He came back before the rains, sold the goods he had brought with him, paid off the money-lenders, sent his mother some Madras muslins brought from that stronghold of the Company to Calcutta for sale to the merchants' wives, sent his father some goldsmiths' treasures and his sisters necklaces and bangles, put his profits into the keeping of the yellow-faced agent, and then, for no reason that anyone knew, went off again when the rains ceased, telling nobody where he was going and taking no merchandise with him. That he went by boat they knew. That he asked his servant Lal to go with him to row the boat they also knew, for Lal told them, adding plaintively :

"But the English lord would have taken me to villages I know not, where the people, who are all bad, would have eaten your honours' unworthy one."

"Sacrificed him to Kali, anyhow," said the agent, when he heard of it ; adding unkindly to Lal : "And the ghost of the English lord will come back and haunt you, do you hear?—because you have been un-

faithful ; and your caste will expel you ; and pi-dogs will drink your blood."

Lal wept—not that he believed what the agent said—but it distressed him when people found fault.

Dabrinda also wept when he heard that Lovat was gone.

"They are very *bad* men. He will not come again," he said, with the Bengali's distinctive ability for looking on the worst side always.

Lovat had not gone far. His boatmen rowed him past the shrine of Kali, and then up one of the many backwaters—canals for the proper irrigation of the land and for its drainage—which the Company, later on, allowed to fall into disuse. When they came to a village they tied up the boat, he landed, and his boatmen, helped by the villagers, disembarked the presents he had brought.

The headman of the village accepted the presents, allowed Lovat the use of a hut in the village bazaar—it belonged to a Mohammedan shoemaker—and kept a wary, interested eye upon his doings.

Lovat's doings, however, were innocuous. He wanted to know how the Indian people lived and what they talked about. He wanted to understand their, so far, incomprehensible religion ; to know the names and attributes of the gods ; to be able to tell one caste from another ; to find out exactly what outcastes were, and why they were outcaste ; what the Indians thought about the English ; about the emperor at Delhi ; how news travelled so fast about the vast country ; why the Mohammedans ate beef and the Hindus did not ; why the cow was a sacred animal

and yet why most animals were ill-treated ; the theory that lay behind child-marriage, and a hundred other things which his conversations with Dabindra had disclosed but which they had never, to his own satisfaction, explained.

He grew thin on watered vegetables and rice ; then cooked the vegetables in clarified butter and got fatter ; ate curried goat with Mohammedans, heard about the burning of widows but never saw it done. Nevertheless, he was shown by a village boy, Ganesha, a sati stone which commemorated such a deed.

"We are proud of the women," said Ganesha. "It is done of their free will so that their husbands will not lack their companionship in the life that is to come. They are good people. This stone is a place of pilgrimage."

He was a slight, almost black-faced boy, two years younger than Lovat but appearing as though he were four or five years older. He had a silky little moustache and wore a dhoti and turban. His father was a hunter employed by the local landowner, and Ganesha, handsome and virile, was being trained to his father's profession. Their caste, that of the Valmikudu, were said to be the descendants of a Brahmin, and in consequence of this, Ganesha had the utmost devotion to all Brahmin customs. He was a good wrestler, and wore his head shaved so that his opponents could not get the advantage of holding on to him by the usual Hindu lock. His sister was a dedicated prostitute, and had been branded by the priest upon her recovery from a dangerous illness. During the time that Lovat lived in the village, however, she was the concubine of a Mohammedan

officer of the guard, yet her family thought no less of her in consequence.

Lovat listened and questioned. Some of his questions received no answer but a polite smile ; others evoked a nervous giggle ; but a good many were answered, with a certain amount of truth. For exercise he wrestled with Ganesha, finding him untrained compared with English wrestlers, and not very skilful, but strong and wiry and possessed of plenty of courage. He wore a lucky charm, the figure of Hanuman the monkey god, on his right arm, and worshipped both Shiva and Vishnu. He placated snakes with milk and also worshipped white ants because their hills reminded his caste of the burial place of the Brahmin from whom they were descended.

The headman of the village was a Kamman, and kept his women in seclusion. So far as anybody in the village knew, they never left his compound, which was surrounded by mud walls too high to be looked over by anything shorter than an elephant. The headman was a respectable landowner, and his friend was the village washerman, a repulsive-looking fellow with yellow eyes who repudiated all washing except that of Brahmins. Thus he had to find other ways of making a living besides by his washing, for the village consisted chiefly of men belonging to Sudra castes ; so he was the keeper of the village idol of Ganga, and also was greatly in request at weddings.

The Ganga procession was led by him when the image was taken to the temple. He was dressed as a woman, and to Lovat was an object more of mirth than of respect, for the impression he conveyed in embroidered sari, and nose-ring, solemnly capering

before the ancient image of the round-cheeked, smiling goddess was ludicrous in the extreme. The goddess herself, in the attitude of ease upon her crocodile, with her left knee bent and her right leg hanging loosely, was clad in a blue sari over a red robe and wore a halo of white and green flowers. She possessed four arms, two of which held flowers, and wore anklets and bracelets of gold. Her nose was broad and good-humoured, her eyebrows met across its bridge, and she gazed downwards coyly but with subtle amusement and pleasure as her worshippers thronged about her, praying for plenty of water for the crops.

Lovat took a fancy to her, joined the shouting throng, shouted as loudly as any, and, in the turban he wore on his dark head, and with his face browned by Indian sunshine, could have passed for a nobly born Indian even in his European waistcoat, baggy, handsome breeches and buckled shoes.

He spent a good deal of time in the village bazaar. Here an Afghan gold-setter and a devil-worshipping potter, beggars, travelling showmen with performing bears, a snake-charmer, Mohammedan shoemakers, the village barber, vendors of fruit, brass vessels, fish, grain and clothes could be watched for hours at a time; Lovat watched them, ate with those whose caste-laws did not forbid it, learned a few words of Pushto, Persian and Tamil, a great deal of Bengali profanity, and something of Brahmin wiles. He returned to the settlement, thin, brown, and announcing, to all who asked him where he had been and what he had seen, that he had been for a holiday inland, away from the river, and had seen a village god standing under a tree. He no longer complained

of the dullness of the English settlement, and he resumed immediately his place in the affections of the factor's young daughter, who had missed him during his absence. He wrote to his father, offering to send him diamonds from Golconda in exchange for English riding horses for sale to Indian nobles. This, he had ascertained, was a particularly profitable transaction, and although he himself was not yet interested in money-making as an art, he thought that his father might be very glad to know of this particular avenue for trade.

Shortly after this, the young girl's father had the good fortune to be of service to the local Moham-medan representative of the Emperor. This man, a powerful and important official, had been bitten by a snake whilst he was out walking on wet ground not far from Kalikata, and the factor, who was with him, had carried him back to the settlement, cut open his foot and made his Mohammedan servant suck hard at the wound.

The official was cured. The devoted servant took no harm, and was rewarded. The factor was also rewarded—so handsomely that the cupidity of Palton (who was not doing nearly as well in India as he had expected to do) was aroused. His plan was simple. The girl, Deborah, would soon be old enough to be married. He supposed that Lovat had ingratiated himself with the father and daughter with this idea in his mind. His own plan, therefore, was to discredit Lovat in the eyes of the factor, and instal himself, instead, as the friend of the family.

There was an engineered affair over a game of cards. Lovat was accused of cheating, sprang up, struck Palton

across the face, and out came swords. The factors interfered; the cards were scrutinised. Owing to the intelligence of the girl, Deborah, who had been allowed to remain in the room as her father was one of the players, the accusation against Lovat had to be withdrawn, and an apology on Lovat's behalf was demanded by Deborah's father. Palton gave it, but not with good grace, and Lovat knew that he had an enemy for life. He paid little regard to the knowledge. The times were troublesome, the Company very busy (not altogether happily, since its activities were not concerned solely with trade, but took on every year a stronger political bias), and there was source for anxiety in the fact, well known at Calcutta and Madras, that the Imperial treasury at Delhi was very badly depleted. Then, too, the Maratha raids were causing depredations everywhere, for where these fierce and brave guerrillas conquered, they levied heavy tribute. Last but not least, the clerks were having to deal with a spate of correspondence from the Mogul government on the score of the increase in private trading and the capture on the seas of Indian merchant ships by English pirates, a state of affairs which exasperated the Company, who were suffering themselves from the pirates. As to the increase in private trading, not only did this annoy the Mogul officials, but the Company's directors in London, and all the correspondence connected with it was acid, plaintive, carping or downright pugnacious. So there was plenty of work for Lovat to keep him from brooding on Palton's enmity.

The country, in fact, was thoroughly unsettled, and the Company, not yet in authority but still in the

country on sufferance, was nervous and its agents were too often irresponsibly intent upon their own concerns and fortunes to pay much heed to their liabilities as the representatives of England.

Lovat went steadily on with his lessons in Bengali with Dabindra. The young Brahmin was exceedingly happy, for his wife had borne him a second son.

"Now," he said to Lovat, "I can do anything I wish. Even if one of my sons should die, there will still be the other to see that the piece of money is put into my hand when my body is laid on the pyre. He will perform all the ceremonies. He will light a torch from the sacred fire and let the water trickle out of the sacred pot which he carries three times round my corpse. So now, if I please, I may become an ascetic; I may make pilgrimage; I may live entirely on water; I have no responsibilities now."

He also had very little time to devote to Lovat's lessons. Nearly the whole of his day was now taken up by religious ceremonies. He practised Yoga, complied with purification rites morning, noon and evening, and was a worshipper of Vishnu, Shiva and their consorts, and had in his house five symbols of the gods in the special place he had set apart for them. Here he performed his worship before the stone of Vishnu, the lingam of Shiva, the piece of red jasper of Ganesha of the elephant head, the metallic ore of Parbati, and the smooth round pebble of the sun. Then he had also his tulsi plant in a pot, and from its stem made the beads of his Brahmin rosary which he used, with his recitations, to help him count the number of times he called on the sacred name. He helped to cook the daily food for the gods in the temples of

Vishnu and Shiva, and helped to distribute it afterwards to the poor.

Lovat said :

“What is it, to be an ascetic? Is it to be, like us, a hermit or a monk?”

“It is—what shall I say it is? It is to find peace. It is to be alone. It is to say Om, to think it, to lose oneself in it. It is to meditate upon it. It is to be with God. It is to find oneself.”

“And is this what all Hindus wish?”

“All, yes. I am *very* glad to tell you all this. You are my *good* friend.”

“And yet, if I ate with you, I should make you unclean.”

“That is because I am a Brahmin.” He held his head proudly. “That is because I am *very* holy.”

“I don’t understand,” said Lovat. “Why are the Brahmins holy? What have they done that all other Hindu castes should look upon them as the highest, even if they are beggars?”

“It is our right,” said Dabindra calmly. “I do not know why. It is fate that we are born Brahmins. Do you know that there was once a king who practised austerities for a thousand years, and could not become a Brahmin?”

Lovat gave up attempting to get his question answered, and listened, not very attentively, to a story from the Mahabarata, and its sequel, from the Ramayama, in which the king, after surmounting incredible difficulties, was at last admitted to the ranks of the Brahmins, and became not only a Brahmin but a saint.

He tried to get some of the factors to talk about

the caste laws with him, but nobody seemed to be interested, and he was left to pursue his enquiries among Indians. Their information, however, was either meagre or muddled. They knew the ways of their own castes, but not the reason for these ways—or so Lovat concluded—and the reason and the origin of caste remained for him a mystery. He supposed that the Brahmins had represented at some time the aristocracy of the land.

Some months later, Dabindra's wife was again with child.

"I shall have the sacred ceremony for a man-child later on," Dabindra told him. "I do not want daughters. Nobody wants daughters. They must be guarded and they must observe purdah and they must have dowries, and if their husbands die and they become widows they must perform sati or else they are disgraced and their heads shaved. Besides, daughters are always bad luck. That is what my caste-mark means—you see?"

He showed the caste-mark on his forehead, two white lines separated by a red one.

"That is the mark of Vishnu, whom I worship. Some are Shiva worshippers—many around here—but I am a Vishnu Brahmin. The red line is woman—she comes between God and man. You understand that? No. I think you are not taking a woman yet. That is a strange thing. I am married at eight, and I have my first son when I am fifteen. That was thought *very* good."

"But what about your sons?" asked Lovat, curious to know what the ceremony would be.

"Oh, *that*?" He giggled with pleasure to think

that Lovat remembered and wanted to know. "It is all signs. You will please understand that it is *all* signs. I shall hold up the branch of a fig-tree with two ripe figs on it, and then I shall squeeze for my wife a little of the juice and I shall beg for a man-child, and then I shall part her hair with the sacred porcupine quill. It is a *pretty* ceremony, and *very* successful always."

Chapter Four



LOVAT WORKED STEADILY DURING THE SIX HOURS A day during which he was on duty, and still devoted some of his leisure to the entertainment of the young English girl. One day she proposed to him that they should get a boatman to row them past Kali's temple. The temple fascinated Lovat, who had understood from Dabindra's elliptical descriptions of the ceremonies of Kali worship, that human sacrifices sometimes were offered to the goddess. There were some queer carvings to be seen. The chief agent had one—a painted wooden panel about ten inches long and eight wide. The goddess was sucking the neck of a headless child. Two big birds—vultures, Lovat thought—were pecking at the necks of other headless figures. The whole was so faithfully—even lovingly—depicted, that the girl, Deborah, taken to see the carving, gave it one glance and refused to look at it again.

Another agent had a little figure of the goddess. She was trampling on Shiva, and about her neck she wore a wreath of human heads. There were pictures, too. The Moslem conquerors of Hindustan had confiscated the attributes of a religion they despised and detested, and some of those that were not destroyed had found their way down to the Company.

There were tales among the merchants, too, of strange

night-orgies carried out in the forests in the light of a sacrificial fire ; of flesh torn from living animals—sometimes from living men—and buried in the fields by peasants anxious to get good crops ; of other rites, too strange and wicked for description ; of the festival of Jaganath in Orissa ; of the voluntary tortures undergone by Untouchable castes to placate the smallpox goddess ; of other interesting, terrible, mysteriously fascinating things.

One day a party had gone out hoping to shoot wild birds in the marshes south of the settlement. There was danger of crocodiles, danger of malaria, danger of being overtaken by one of the sudden squalls that the bay could conjure up as though it had power of djinns, but all the younger men, including Lovat and Palton, joined the little expedition as a relief from monotony and work. Indian boatmen went with the party, provisions for a week were taken (although the company did not expect to be absent for more than three days), and the young girl begged to go with them. Lovat was for taking her along, but the other men raised objections. Her father, too, demurred, and her duenna, the English lady with whom she had travelled to India, snorted a scandalised veto on the suggestion. Deborah wept with disappointment, and Lovat said that, if she wished it, he himself would give up the thought of going off with the others.

“You would be very glad of her company, either here or there, I dare say,” said Palton insolently. Lovat looked blankly at him.

The expedition, however, was cut short by the rains, which came earlier than usual that year, and

while they lasted there was nothing much to do except check the stores, go over the accounts, gossip, gamble, drink, swear at the servants or beat them, write letters home, or, as Lovat and the young girl Deborah did, find some kind of harmless amusement. He taught her Bengali and Hindi, and such bits of Tamil and Pushto as he knew. For hours they sat together, often Indian fashion on cushions or on the beautifully carpeted floor, whilst the English duenna sewed or wrote long letters to England, and the rain streamed down outside, and the swollen river ran past the fortifications.

Dabindra did not come into the settlement during the time of the rains, but the shy Lal was pressed into service, and, squatting humbly just inside the doorway, would tell devil-stories and ghost-stories in the vernacular. His was a change from Dabindra's educated, pure Bengali speech, with its wealth of delicate differentiations and shades of meaning, but it had a definite value. Far more people talked like Lal than talked like Dabindra, said Lovat. His speech contained words from the aboriginal tongue of the Kondhs and the Kols, and, once he lost his terror of having to make a public appearance for the purpose of these long conversations, he proved to be a raconteur of such raciness that Lovat did not always translate to Deborah exactly what he said.

It was after a week and a half of this innocent pastime that the duenna grew tired of her duties and went off for an hour or so to sleep. As neither Lovat nor Deborah cared in the slightest whether she was there or not, and made no difference in their behaviour—for the duenna was a pleasant, innocuous, good-

humoured woman whom her charges usually forgot until she reminded them that it was time for a meal or Deborah's bedtime—it seemed unnecessary, in Lovat's opinion, that Palton should appear in the doorway one sultry afternoon whilst the duenna was enjoying a siesta, flourish a whip, order Deborah out of the way, kick Lal so that he fell over sideways, and set about Lovat.

Lovat repeated the order to Deborah, who chose to disregard it. Then he ran in under the thong, seized Palton round the waist, crooked his leg behind the silken-stockinged calf of his adversary and, with a twist he had learned from Ganesha in the village, threw him heavily. He then, regrettably, trod on him with a red-heeled, English shoe, picked up the whip, flourished it in his turn, and ordered Palton out of the room. Later, he reported the whole affair to Deborah's father.

"I believe the fellow has some thought that he may marry the girl," said another of the younger men, later, to Lovat.

"Ridiculous," said Lovat, coldly. "Her father would never consider it for an instant." Yet Palton, he knew, was determined, somehow, to make a fortune for himself. Unscrupulous and brutal, he cheated, lied, used all the power which his place with the Company gave him, terrified the poorer Indians and overbore the wealthier, and was in a fair way, Lovat decided, to get himself murdered, once the timid babus could make up their minds to supply his cook with a little powdered glass.

The rains held back, after fairly continuous floods, and normal work was resumed. Lovat saw very

much less of Deborah in consequence, and learned that Palton, who was keeping out of his way, had been wretchedly ill of a fever, but was pulling round as well as a rather poor constitution, weakened by dissolute living, would allow. Lovat did not intend to go and see him. He believed that Deborah's father had had one interview with him after the affair of the whip, and had ordered him not to come to his quarters again.

One hot afternoon Deborah reiterated her desire to be rowed past Kali's temple. Down they went to the waterside, and stood for a time beneath an enormous umbrella held over their heads by Lal, and watched the craft on the river. Big ships and small, merchantmen at anchor, or coming to port, or leaving for England laden with Indian produce, shared the great stretch of the river with all the small native craft, with people bathing from the temple steps, with bum-boat men and shore-leave boats and all the flotsam of a busy river-side market.

After a bit Lovat called an Indian boatman. Plenty of boats were plying for hire, but the factors generally had their regular employees. It was Lal who had found one for Lovat, a singularly unblemished young man in a land where diseases, from elephantiasis to bubonic plague, were common, and where most of the boatmen suffered from hookworm or itch and among whom leprosy itself was not uncommon.

Up came the smiling youth, and Lovat handed Deborah in. The boat was tub-like, and had an awning of jute-fibre stretched over upright poles to shield the Europeans from the sun. Past Kali's steps the boatman rowed the couple, and then, by Lovat's

orders, lay on his oars and let the tide drift them back the way they had come. When the boat, kept steady and steered by an oar pushed over the stern, drifted too far down towards the factory, the rower pulled upstream again.

Deborah grew tired of this.

"I wish we could land at the steps," she said. Lovat objected. The steps belonged to the temple.

"That is not for us. The Indians would not like us to land at the steps," he said.

He respected their prejudices because he had always respected equally extraordinary ideas current in the village at home.

"Sit down," he added. "You will overturn the boat."

"I am going to overturn the boat unless you will take me to the steps." She laughed, daring him. Lovat pulled her down and gave an order to the boatman, who began to row back to the factory. Deborah pushed Lovat. He laughed and held her wrists, the boatman, without seeming to do so, watching indulgently. Opposite the factory she wrenched her hands away, and, with the sudden effort, overbalanced and fell overboard. They were in shallow, muddy water. Lovat let her scramble ashore before he ordered the boatman to pull in so that he could land.

He thought no more of the matter; had been invited to dine publicly with the other agents—Deborah had given a truthful account of the mishap and had changed her wet clothes and gone to bed at her father's orders, not as a punishment but as a preventive of chills—and all that Lovat observed during the

long and heavy meal at which all the factors were present, was that the black-avised Palton, now sufficiently recovered, looked gloomy and said nothing, but drank a good deal of wine. As this accorded with his general behaviour at the time, nobody took much notice. He left the table, however, before the end of the meal. Late that night Lovat heard shrill squeals in the compound, followed by groaning. Thinking that one of the Sepoy guards was ill-treating some other Indian, he put one leg out of bed with the intention of going out and shouting for silence, when his sleeping quarters were invaded by two men armed with lathis, stout, heavy, iron-shod bamboos. Boy-like, quick to size up a dangerous situation, he leaped up, seizing the curved Kabul sword he kept handy for fear of the Marathas, and made short work of the Indians, whom he straight-way supposed to be robbers. Then he ran out, brandishing the sword, excited, trembling and sick. There he found, first, his servant, wounded and frightened, and also Palton, very drunk, who shouted "Villain! Seducer!" and fired a musket at him. The ball went wide, and Lovat, in his fright, almost severed the young man's neck. Then he made for the river and the boats, dragging the terrified, moaning Lal along. Before the factory was fully roused, he was off, rowing energetically up-stream, his blood-dripping sword at the bottom of the boat and poor Lal lying beside it.

At first there was no pursuit. Then he saw torches flaring. But the river was wide, and the boat was soon lost among all the ships that were moored off the factory frontage. Poor Lal died before morning.

Chapter Five

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THE VILLAGE LAY ON WHAT LOVAT ALWAYS THOUGHT of as the Company's side of the river. He made his landing at sunset of the second day, mooring the boat, as the Indians did, to a pole which he drove for a long way into the oozy mud of the bank. A rope held the boat in check. So far from mid-stream there was very little current.

A clump of bamboos hid the village. He passed a few palm trees, and at a well some people were drawing water. They stared at him. They were miserable-looking creatures, the men thin-shanked and wearing dirty-white dhotis, the women in jute-fibre saris with anklets of the cheapest kind. Lovat thought they looked criminals, but supposed them wretched, underfed and in debt. He said, in the dialect, waiting to speak until all were aware of his presence and had ceased, from fear, to edge away :

"I want to spend the night here."

There were plenty of ruined huts, for when a hut fell to decay the people did not repair it but built another at the side. He added, when nobody spoke :

"Who is your headman here ?"

But they did not offer him shelter, nor did they guide him to anyone in authority. Slowly, glancing backwards, they drifted away, hag-ridden, poor,

aboriginal and distrustful, so Lovat went back to his boat and ate the native food he had brought from a village about ten miles from the English settlement. Judging that the Indians knew better than the English the kind of food which suited the climate, he had always preferred the native fish and rice to the heavier meals which the merchants generally demanded.

He did not sleep when he lay in his boat, for he was afraid of being set upon and robbed, but he spent an interesting, uncomfortable night watching the stars and listening to all the night noises, conscious of the moving water beneath him and the teeming, flat, mysterious country each side.

At dawn he ate again, and then rowed on before the people came down to the river-bank. During the day he came to a considerable tributary. On his previous journeys he had kept always to the main reach of the river, but the tributary tempted him. He tried it. Through the flat landscape he pursued it, rowing slowly along, and, when the heat grew great, pulling in to the side and mooring the boat to find shelter under the trees. He had no thought of danger in the day-time, but, all the same, he had wiped and rubbed up the sword, and kept it where he could quickly get at it. There was trouble everywhere, he knew, and no protection for a young man who was running away from a killing. He wondered whether it might not have been well to have stayed and faced an enquiry. He could not make up his mind. Instinct had told him to run, and reason was not yet altogether against the advice it had given.

He gave up pondering the problem, pushed off again,

and rowed on. In the late afternoon he made another village. It lay along a little backwater, in which the people rotted jute. The narrow channel, branching off at an acute angle from his tributary, carried just enough water for his boat. He tied the boat to a tree, struggled through mud to the shore, and then walked stiffly along to the palm-fringed huts. After his previous experience he was doubtful about his reception, but he needed food, and he wanted a hiding-place in case he was being pursued. He looked keenly about him as he walked, but not from fear of being attacked. The place seemed very quiet, but he knew that at that hour the men would be in the fields. Judging by the number of houses there were not more than a few dozen people in the village. It was very small; no more than a straggle of the usual mud huts thatched with reeds, rice-straw or grasses. Two or three open-fronted huts were the booths and workshops, a jumbled collection of huts of all sizes grouped haphazardly about a small compound which harboured goats and a few scraggy fowls marked the headman's dwelling place, and the homes of his kin and hangers-on, and in the whole place there was only one door which fitted. This, Lovat knew, was the door to the women's quarters. Some naked children sat about in the dirt, but of the owner of the place there was no sign.

Before Lovat had been there more than a minute, however, he knew that he was being peeped at by the women. He found a shady place, sat down and patiently waited. Villagers, coming home from their fields at evening, halted a few yards from him, and giggled shyly, and looked away if he looked in their

direction. They laughed on a high note of nervousness when he asked, in Bengali, for the headman.

"He comes," said a voice from the crowd. It parted, and through the centre of it walked a couple of men—brothers, Lovat decided—bearing heavy bamboo poles and wearing coats as well as dhotis and turbans. They did not seem suspicious or afraid, but walked straight up to him and one of them asked what he wanted.

"To live here," Lovat replied. Over the flat land the sun had begun to set. It reddened the hoof-prints of cattle, the bogs and water-holes and the long, drowned cart-tracks on the lane that led from the tillage to the huts. It blackened the long-trunked palm trees and luridly lit the clouds that came darkening the evening. Gleaming where the last light caught its surface, but otherwise running brown, the backwater flowed to the tributary and the tributary ran towards the river. The river, mysterious as the people, bore its dark floods to the sea. The temple bell of the village came on the air of the evening, but not like the church bells at home; neither was the flat wet land like the country of the Fens, nor the dusk like an English evening. The headman looked at Lovat, and then conferred with his young and handsome brother. They argued, then came to agreement. The villagers, who had all joined in on one side or the other, began to disperse. The brothers bowed themselves in the Moslem attitude of prayer. Then from the house came the sound of a stringed instrument, and a woman's voice singing monotonously on and on.

(2)

The house they provided for Lovat was thatched and in poor repair. On one side it was open to the road which ran past it down to the creek. It was made of mud, thatched with rice-straw, and had but a single room. It had not been occupied for many months. A murder had taken place in it, and it was reputed to be haunted by a ghost. The floor was of earth, trodden hard, and at the back of the house was a small, mudwalled courtyard. There were no windows.

Lovat, although he had not been informed that there was a ghost, was in no doubt about the quality of his reception. It was obvious that the majority of the villagers did not want him, and that the headman was of their opinion but had been won over by his handsome brother. The language spoken in the village was barely comprehensible to him, for it was not the Bengali he had learned from Dabindra at the factory, but a version containing, he supposed, a good many aboriginal or polyglot words. The villagers he had seen looked as though they might be Kols, except for the headman, his brother and one or two others, finer-looking men than the rest.

The headman and all his people were Moslems, but many of the villagers wore the red line of Kali-worship in the parting of the hair. The orthodox worship of the village, he had been told, was Shivism, although he had seen no altars. He supposed that outside the village there must be a temple to Shiva.

The hut being nothing but a shelter, and, he resolved, a temporary one, he slept on no bed, but

spent a bone-aching night on the floor. He had begged a piece of cloth for a mosquito-net, and could hear the deadly little creatures humming upon the wing until he fell asleep. He woke early, before it was light, and walked out of his hut to the river. Here he stripped and bathed before the dawn, in case women came later on for water and saw him naked.

On his way back to the village he heard the sound of digging. He had heard the fall of the spade on soft earth too often at home to wonder what the sound was. Moreover, more than one spade was at work, and yet there was no conversation.

He knew little, comparatively, at that time, about Indian villagers, but he believed that when they were gathered together they conversed; they often quarrelled; sometimes they sang; he did not believe that in company they could be silent. Noise, to them, was as necessary as breathing. Feeling a certain amount of curiosity, therefore, about these silent husbandmen—he did not think that it could be a burial, for the Indians did not bury their dead except in some cases of disease—he stole up to where they were working, stood behind a thick-trunked tree, and watched.

The dawn was just breaking. The greyness gave sufficient light for him to be able to see that the men were certainly burying bodies. He watched them—there were six of them at the work—whilst they buried five stark corpses. One man used a pick, the others shovelled earth. There were two more dead men underneath the trees. Lovat went quietly to his hut, squatted outside it, and waited for the village to shake off its sleep and start work.

The sun rose rapidly. There was a little of morning cloud which turned green, then pink, then white, and before long out came the villagers to their labour. A group soon formed before his hut. Lovat took no notice of them, but waited for the headman or a message. The villagers discussed him pointedly, then gradually went off to the fields. When they had all gone, a little boy, dirty and ill-clad, but wearing silver bracelets, gold ear-rings and the usual amulet, came and stood before him, bowed low and folded his arms.

"From whom do you come?" asked Lovat.

"From my father, the headman of this village," the child replied. "His wish is to speak with you."

"Then let him approach and speak with me," Lovat replied. He had seen the headman hiding at the bend in the winding road.

"You will want a cook," said the headman, coming forward to greet him. "There is no cook here. No servants. Nobody."

"You want me to go. Is that it?" Lovat enquired.

"None of these people will cook for you," the headman stubbornly repeated. "It is not allowed. Their religion does not permit it."

"Why cannot I have a Moslem to cook for me, then?"

"There are no Moslems except for my own family. My brother and I—we are the worshippers of Allah. These others——" He spat, having no words to waste on the others.

"Very well. I will come and stay at your house until the next new moon," said Lovat, calmly. The headman looked baffled. Hospitality was a sacred duty to Mohammedans, as Lovat very well knew.

"We will make gifts for you to go," the headman volunteered, apologetically. Lovat was startled. A poor village, such as this, must be very anxious to be rid of him if the headman was prepared to make gifts to hasten his departure. He did not like the sound of it. He said, after thinking for a moment.

"Go. Give me until the evening."

The headman, obviously dissatisfied, walked away. Lovat let him go, and then went out to see the surroundings of the village.

The temple to Shiva was situated in the middle of the fields, and was a low, mud-roofed structure, supported in the front on pillars, and housing a mud-plastered emblem of the god, before which a dim light burned. No priest, orthodox in robe of saffron colour, solemnly assessing the amount of the morning offering, could be seen. Two oxen, however, were placidly grazing nearby, and Lovat supposed that the priest made money by hiring them out at good rates to the village for ploughing. He squatted, Indian fashion—a position he had learned to keep up for about twenty minutes without his legs becoming unmanageably stiff and cramped—and considered his case. It amounted to the fact that he needed food, shelter and safety from pursuit. All could be found in the village, he thought, if only the villagers would have him.

No priest appeared, so, after a bit, he walked on. The road ended, indefinitely—for paths branched off indeterminately from it in three or four directions—in the shade of a very old tree. Under the tree, with a large belly and ugly little legs, long-armed and crowned with a kind of halo—five large knobs on

the top of his all-but-featureless head—stood the village god. Offerings of flowers and a handful of scattered grain proved that he had some devotees, but gave some indication that those who worshipped him were poor.

Lovat saluted the god, in case any of the villagers were watching, and walked on into the fields. Beyond the cultivated land was the fallow, and then the waste. In the middle of a patch of very rough pasture was a solitary altar to Shiva, a squarish block of stone which bore the god's emblem and was rudely carved on the sides with what might have been either male or female figures. They were so crudely chiselled that it was difficult to say which they were. He lifted his hands to the god without approaching too near to the altar, inspected it, and walked on. The country became wilder for two or three miles, and then he could see that he was approaching another village. He turned back by the way he had come.

When he reached his hut he found it in the possession of a posse of villagers, the headman and a priest. He walked up to them. From somewhere near at hand came a monotonous beating of drums.

"You want me to leave your village?" he said.
"Must I go?"

The headman replied, evasively, that the village had little to offer, that the hut was the haunt of a bad ghost, that when the rains came the countryside was flooded, that there were many poisonous snakes, that when the crops were harvested hundreds of monkeys came down and ate up everything, that rents were high, moneylenders inordinately exacting, all the wells full of bad water, and that the village lived

in hourly expectation of being burnt by marauding Marathas.

"I see. You wish me to go," said Lovat. He nodded. "Give me my sword." He pushed past the headman, ducked inside the opening, and brought out the great, curved blade. He walked away towards the river, flung the sword into his boat, pushed off, and was soon at the confluence of the backwater and the tributary. He looked back. The villagers had followed him to the shore and were watching him out of sight. There was not a sound to be heard. They did nothing but stand in the rich thick mud and watch.

The current carried his boat, so he lay on his oars and stared back at the silent village. Then he bent to his rowing, and followed the tributary up towards its source. Hostility he could have understood, fear would have won his sympathy ; but here was nothing but secrecy. Something was going on that had to be kept from a stranger. He wanted to know what it was. He supposed it had some connection with the burials that had taken place that morning, and thought over very carefully what he had seen. He had not seen the faces of the dead, but their bodies, he knew, were not wounded.

Towards the middle of the day he pulled in to the side, having passed by several villages during the morning, and, tying up, he rested on the edge of cultivated fields where there were four tall trees. Except for clumps of bamboo and an occasional solitary palm tree, the country, as far as he could see from where he sat, was flat and green. He had a very good sense of direction, and had formed the

opinion that if he abandoned his boat and walked south and a point by west he would strike his mysterious village again in a journey of ten or twelve miles.

He had no plans except to get back to it, so he lay in the shade of the trees, and decided, when he was rested, to stroll off and look for a well. Before he was ready to do this, a sound attracted his attention, and a woman was there, looking down on him. She was ugly, and deeply pitted with smallpox scars; her complexion was almost black. She carried a metal vessel filled with water, and Lovat, sitting up, told her that he was thirsty. He cupped his hands, but the woman produced a piece of hollow bamboo and he put the end into her pitcher and drank long and thirstily. He walked with her into the village. She was silent, but did not seem afraid. When they came to the well she filled up her vessel again, and on they went to the houses, passing through the market with its open-fronted booths. Her husband was a leather-seller, an untouchable, a small, thin, shrewd-eyed man, outcaste by reason of his trade. His fate did not seem to depress him, since nobody blamed him for his state, and he squatted beside his skins, plying his trade, reasonably skilful, whilst two little children sat in the dust by the booth, and played with the bits of clay thrown to them by a potter. One child had a flower in its hair, and both wore charms against demons; otherwise they were naked.

Lovat walked through the bazaar. His presence excited remark, but did not appear to cause concern. A woman who was cooking rice and vegetables gave him a biggish portion in half a gourd, and he squatted

beside her in front of her house and ate the food with his fingers. He had not asked for it. The woman ate nothing, but put the rest of the food, except for one small portion, into a larger gourd, and got up to take it to her husband, who was busy at his work in the fields. Lovat went with her, out past the well, and on to the cultivated land near to where he had tied up his boat. Rice was the chief crop, and some of the people cultivated jute as well. It was nearing the time of the harvest. He looked at the labourers, thin-shanked, dark-skinned men; some wore a loincloth, some the longer dhoti. They were putting in one of the recognised periods of work on the land of the owner of the village. Lovat watched for a bit, and then sat down beside the woman. The man was suffering from cataract in the left eye. He came over and sat in the shade to have his meal. The woman did not eat with her husband, and, since he offered no remark, she made no conversation. Lovat stared at the man's eye. Then he said, in Bengali, pointing to his own :

"How long has your eye been blind?"

"Since my daughter died," the man answered.

"I pray the gods make it to see."

"That is not likely. The gods made it white. I should have sacrificed the child. Then perhaps they would have taken the curse away."

"Did, then, the child die?"

"I am poor. I have two daughters now," the man replied, as though that were an answer to the question.

"What did the third child die of?" Lovat asked. Such personal questions, he knew, having learned this from Dabindra, were not in bad taste among

Indians. But the man did not answer, and, changing the subject, Lovat asked, pointing suddenly away to the southward :

“What village is that where they bury dead men in the dark ?”

It was too suddenly asked. The man leapt to his feet and, giving him a frightened glance, hurried away to his tillage. Lovat looked after him thoughtfully, and then went back to the village. There was mystery somewhere, that was certain. All thought of his own danger, if the Company had set men on his track for murder, was disappearing in the stronger emotion of maddening curiosity.

He had seen the burning funeral pyres on the banks of the Hooghly near the settlement, and did not now, at that time, that diseased bodies were sometimes buried, or that they polluted the water-supplies, and spread the very sickness of which the victims had died. But, even had he been aware of this, he would have found something secret and uneasy in that fall of the pick, that hasty shovelling of earth, that hurried interment which yet had something of a ritual air about it.

He left the bazaar. The chattering street had seen young Englishmen before, but neither unaccompanied nor unkempt, and speculation about him was free and not far away from the truth. He could buy nothing, for he had nothing of value except the silver crucifix his mother had hung round his neck. He took it out and looked at it, not for its comfort, and certainly not for its religious significance, but idly, thinking of his home. A poor man passing by accosted him, and pointed to the cross.

"I will take you to Father Xavier," he said.

"Father Xavier? A priest?"

"No, no. Not a priest." They were using the word which meant a Hindu priest. "Father Xavier."

"No, thank you. I do not wish to go to him."

"He is a good man. He is very good."

"I know. I do not want to see a priest." Lovat smiled at the man, and, turning, walked away from him and back towards the river. He could feel that the man was staring after him. He wondered whether the man, an outcaste, probably, and therefore attracted by Christian teachings, would run to the Catholic priest—a Portuguese, perhaps, or a Frenchman—and tell him that there was another European in the village. Lovat walked as fast as he could. He did not wish to give the village the idea that he was running away, for in that case the dogs and probably the men would give chase, but as soon as he was clear of the houses and the open-fronted booths of the bazaar, he broke into a sharp trot and made for his moored boat. Two children were sitting near it, minding a wallowing buffalo. He smiled at them, then, stepping in, he seated himself, and soon was pulling up-stream.

The sun was extremely hot. Other backwaters opened out of the tributary he was following, and when one offered shade from the heat of the day, he made for it, getting all the shelter that he could. The backwater branched in the right direction, too, he thought. Towards the middle of the afternoon he went into temporary hiding to let a merchant convoy pass him by. The goods were loaded upon camels and a couple of elephants, and from various

small indications, noticeable to him who had seen many convoys come in, he realised that the merchants must be bound for the English factory. They were armed with swords and spears ; their servants carried sticks. As they were going his way he decided to travel, unknown to them, in their party. He let them pass the clump of bushes where he lay, then picked his sword out of the bottom of the boat and went after them. The servants sang as they walked. The great plodding elephants swaying languorously, the uneven gait of the camels, and the singing servants using their iron-bound lathis as staves to help them on their journey, made sufficient noise to cover the sound of his footsteps, as, keeping at some distance from the cavalcade, Lovat followed where it led.

Soon it would halt for the night. A fire would be built and stacked up. The animals would be picketed. There would be food. He wondered how he could manage to get something to eat without letting the merchants know of his presence near them.

They stopped by a shrine not very far from a village. The ground round the shrine was open, but there were trees, a considerable grove, about two hundred yards away. Near to the shrine was a well. The servants drew all the water, a fairly sure indication that the merchants were Moslems. A fire was stacked and lighted, after some trouble and the expenditure of a good deal of whistling energy, food was produced, and the servants waited upon their employers. Then they, at a distance from the merchants, began to eat their own meal. Certain by this time that the servants were all Mohammedans or else of very low caste, Lovat decided to approach

them. Openly and boldly, stepping into the glow of the fire-light, dark-faced, black-haired, ingenuous and young, he asked, in Bengali, for food.

The merchants had risen. The servants, gripping their lathis, surrounded the English boy.

"What do you want?" asked the oldest merchant, eyeing him closely but calmly.

"In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate, food."

"Peace be with you," the merchant said composedly.

"Are you alone or with friends?"

"Peace be with you, too. I am alone."

So he sat with them and ate, and drank the water brought to the fireside by the servants. Later on the camp was picketed, and Lovat slept. It was the deepest sleep he had had since leaving the factory, but it did not last until dawn. There was a sudden yell from a sentry, a moan, another yell, the squealing of picketed elephants, and then the camp leapt to life. The sentry nearest to the grove of trees was dead. The merchants turned him over. Near him another man was dead, a stranger clad only in a loincloth. His skin was slippery with oil. The second sentry, a Pathan, very brave, had leapt to his comrade's side and slaughtered the Hindu aggressor. The dying fire was revived, the corpses were dragged to the light of it and examined.

"Phansigars," said the oldest merchant.

Lovat sought enlightenment, but nobody seemed to be willing to explain. The dawn broke. The servants loaded the animals. The bodies were left beside the fire which a servant put out with water taken from the well. The cavalcade of traders moved

INDIAN RAIN

onward, having bidden farewell (unmistakably so) to Lovat. They had also left him some food. They did not actually say so, but it was evident that they thought they had reason to fear him. He pondered the matter deeply, drank of the well-water after he had eaten, and decided still to follow them, for he believed that their midday halting place might be outside the village which he sought. He was sorry they did not trust him. He had not abused their hospitality. He thought perhaps they feared all strangers, for the times were unsettled and changing.

He plodded along in their wake, after giving them a start of about three-quarters of a mile. He could see the cloud of dust they raised. It hung in the air for a long time after they had passed. He wished that he could have travelled back in their company, but their leave-taking had been final.

"Go in the peace of God," they had said when they left him.

Chapter Six



(I)

HE CAME TO THE VILLAGE IN THE EVENING, AND, without reference to anyone, went to the ruined hut they had given him before. He had his mother's dark hair and dark eyes, and he believed he might pass for an Indian if he wore the native dress. After night-fall, having lain hidden in the hut until the villagers, returning from the fields, were all in their houses, he crept out and went the rounds. In the compound of the headman's house he came upon what he sought. Dhotis had been washed and were still spread out upon the bushes. He snatched one and smuggled it away. He had to obtain a turban and, if possible, some shoes.

He slept in the ghost-ridden hut, not soundly, but sufficiently, for about a couple of hours. There was no moon—it was what Indians call “the dark of the moon”—and he made his way quietly towards the river to look upon the burying-ground which had so much intrigued his fancy. He sheltered behind his great tree-trunk again and waited. But nothing except the cry of a jackal, followed by the far-off muttering of very distant thunder, disturbed the peace of the night, and at dawn he went back to the hut and slept in its farthest recess until the middle of the morning.

He woke up very hungry and went to the house of the headman, knowing that at that time he would probably be in the fields. Several children were playing in the compound, and an unveiled woman, who quickly threw the embroidered end of her sari across her mouth, was seated on the top of three steps which led to the women's quarters.

"I salute you, O lovely one," said Lovat, in Bengali, approaching to within ten feet of her. There was a giggle from the woman. A deeper chuckle from the interior proclaimed that an older woman, probably the headman's mother, was also in residence. Emboldened by these evidences of female interest and approbation, Lovat continued boldly :

"I am hungry, charitable ones. Also I have nothing with which to cover my head from the sun."

There was a pause. Then the younger woman, with another giggle, half of excitement, half of fright, scrambled indoors and shut the door. Lovat stood still, conscious that he was being scrutinised from within. Suddenly the door opened, a thin, brown hand appeared, and chupatties and a bowl of rice, with some messy-looking little dried fish on top, were placed on the steps ; the hand then was hastily withdrawn. He salaamed with some ceremony, knowing that he could be seen. He carried the food away and squatted down in the shade of a banyan tree which was growing near at hand and ate with his fingers, careful to ask a blessing first on the food. He replaced the empty bowl on the top of the steps, salaamed again, and withdrew. In another moment the bowl was taken in; and out came a dhoti and a turban. He came forward and picked up the strip

of coarse jute-cloth, but let the garment lie. He said, to the close-shut door :

“The dhoti I had last night.”

More giggles answered him. Then a voice, speaking through an aperture which he could not see although he looked for it, said softly :

“Cover your head, O man without shame, O thief, O impudent mendicant.”

Lovat grinned his boy's grin and skilfully put on the turban. He had bought one at the Company's settlement, and had learned the quick twist of the ends, and the rapid knot. More delighted giggles greeted the result. Then there was silence. He waited, anticipating a request to enter the zenana, for the headman, he knew, would not be back before noon. None came. He salaamed again to the empty doorway, went back to his hut, replete and amused. He felt a little sentimental, too, about the women, and tried, but failed, to imagine his mother's reactions and those of his sisters, if an Indian boy had asked them for food and clothes.

(2)

To his surprise the village, which soon became aware of his alien presence, no longer appeared to object to having him there. In dhoti and turban, enjoying the freedom of the dress after his own formal garments which in no way had been suited to the climate, he helped the headman to collect and check the dues. Very little money rent was paid. The bullion for Indian coinage came nearly all from England, and little of it came the way of the smaller villages. Rent was paid in kind, or by labour in the fields of the

landlord, or by some other kind of service. Lovat got all his food and lived rent free. He did not see or speak to the zenana women again, although they cooked some of his food. Fortunately he could eat with the headman, his brother and his kinsmen, for, as the household was Mohammedan, there were no caste difficulties. Life was peaceful and easy. There were rumours of wars, but no more.

As time went on, however, Lovat became aware that, beneath the surface of the ordinary life of the village, something else was still going on, something illicit, secret, horrible, immensely exciting and dangerous. The headman was burying money; he was living better than his circumstances seemed to warrant; he was much better dressed, had finer weapons, kept more concubines—his house, Lovat soon discovered (chiefly from servants' gossip), was full of women in the shut-off women's quarters—than a man in his position could expect. Lovat, whom experience of accountancy with the Company had made mentally agile in such matters, did not take many months to discover that between the headman's share of the dues he collected and his actual income there was a vast, intriguing, unaccountable difference. Then there were all manner of strange goings and comings at night. These began when he had been in the village for three or four months, and when he mentioned them he was solemnly warned by the headman against robbers—wandering bands of dacoits—who would kill him at sight in order to rob his body. This Lovat took as a warning to remain in his hut at night, and not to be meddlesome. He heeded the warning in the sense that when he left his hut

at nights he took care that nobody saw him, but, try as he would, he could get no deeper than dacoits, and he was beginning to think that robbery under arms, and nothing more, was the explanation of his landlord's obvious prosperity, when he stumbled upon another burying.

He had been travelling from village to village one day, and checking tallies of dues to be paid against the next rice and jute harvests—for the Emperor's representative held Bengal in trust for the Mogul Treasury, and large tracts of country, supporting several villages, were held by local landowners, most of them Moslem tenants of the Government. In the manner of the wealthier Bengalis, he travelled everywhere by camel, and on his return journey the beast which he and a servant were riding stumbled, fording a little stream, and fell dead.

The Indian, who was sitting in front, slid off neatly, but Lovat came off very awkwardly, doubling his leg underneath him. He found that he could not stand on it when he got up. He had twisted it badly. The Indian, a typical babu, clever but highly nervous and not dependable, made off at once for home before it got dark. Lovat called after him, but, finding he would not stay, crawled painfully into the shade and waited for someone to help him. He was several miles from his village, but he thought that some of the people who lived in the village nearby would be certain sooner or later to come to the stream, and that they would get him back home.

The first to come were two girls. They carried vessels for water, sat on the bank and gossipped, leisurely got the water, set their vessels upright in

the mud, gathered handfuls of riverside flowers, and took no notice of his calling, except that one of them glanced up and giggled modestly. Lovat could have cursed the innocent devotee of Shiva, for it was most apparent that she supposed him to be some bold philanderer with designs upon her chastity. As soon as the girls were ready, they went off without casting a glance at him, although the jingling of their anklets might have been intended as an invitation to him to follow them back to the village.

Next came a naked child wearing a bracelet. He was in nominal charge of a buffalo, and shouted with fear when Lovat called to him, and would not go near the tree under which he lay. Instead, he called the lazy great buffalo up out of the water, and the two of them walked farther along the bank, away from Lovat and a hundred yards from the dead camel. Nobody else came that way. When the evening darkened, Lovat's leg was so stiff that it was with the greatest difficulty that he could manage to move at all. The night fell quickly. He knew that if he called, and anybody passing heard him, it would be supposed that he was a demon. Nevertheless, he did call out, and a villager, late from the fields, fled away from him, yelling in terror.

He dragged himself painfully along, but at last became so much exhausted that, before he came to the outskirts of the village, he found he could go no farther. He was on the high-road—a flattened elephant-track through spiky grass. He felt that his only hope was that a cavalcade of belated merchants might pass. He had no expectation that the headman would trouble to send a search-party for him if he

failed to return to his village. His only friend was the headman's younger brother, and he was away from home.

He lay in the shelter of trees chopped away from the road, and propped himself up on his elbow. This grew uncomfortable. Mosquitoes began to hum ; he covered his face and hands as well as he could against bites. He wondered whether there were snakes ; he thought of the danger of wild beasts. At dawn there would be the vultures.

The night was black except for stars. Lovat lay on his back and watched them, his turban wrapped round his face. There was cloud in the sky, light and high, and the stars seemed to cluster about it like jewels on a dark Kashmir dress. There were noises—rustling, sighing, disturbing, plaintive, expectant. He felt no urge for sleep. He was restless, nervous, and in pain. He began to think of Indian ghosts he had heard of. He strained his ears for unaccountable sounds. He began to wonder how far away the funeral pyre was that he had seen burning as he went on his rounds. On hilly ground, or beside water—that was where they burned the bodies ; and the poor women, burned to death beside their husbands—surely their ghosts walked, he thought. The factors told terrible stories about wives who were held down by poles when they tried to escape from the fire. His own great-great—he lost count of the generations—had saved her English husband from the Inquisition's *auto-da-fé* in Lisbon. His mother, her direct descendant, was like her to look at, people said. The portraits in the long gallery at his home suggested it, but people were always prone to see family likenesses, he thought.

It had annoyed him, when he was a child, to be told he was like his maternal grandfather, a black-eyed, black-haired and, in Lovat's opinion, exceedingly ugly old man.

His thoughts ran on, in widening circles, not so horribly. He still had his mother's crucifix, but did not wear it in public. He had buried it underneath the floor of his hut in the corner the Indians sometimes keep for the gods. He knelt there to say his prayers. Indians had seen him at them, and had stood sympathetically near, men of a race extraordinarily tolerant of gods ; the gods of others as well as their own gods ; worshippers of laughing Krishna ; worshippers of blood-soaked Kali ; dogged by Kharma ; fettered by caste ; superstitious, idolatrous, philosophical, deeply, sincerely and beautifully religious and wise.

The hours dragged on. He dozed part of the time, and towards dawn he was awakened from one of these periods of short, uneasy slumber by a noise. It was the sound of spades upon earth. His leg was so stiff that he feared to crawl forward lest the clumsy movement should betray his presence. The digging went on. He listened, scarcely breathing, and tried to locate the spot from which it came. The men were not far off the highroad. The sounds came clear and sharp upon the air. It was difficult to estimate distance, but he decided that they could not be more than twenty yards away from where he was in hiding.

The digging went steadily on. A pick was used first, to break up the hard, dry ground, and then went on that steady shovelling. He could fancy he saw them at it—oily-skinned, dark-brown men in loin-

cloths and turbans—shovelling the earth from the graves with queer little hoe-like spades, and then shovelling it back on the bodies. He felt he must see the grim sight. Regardless of pain or of noise, he began to crawl slowly forward. The men did not hear him. He poked his head out of the bushes and found himself about fifteen yards away—too distant to see very much of what they were doing. He crawled back again, dragging his leg. There was not a pause in the steady labour of the multiple burials. He began to make a rhythmic pattern out of the fall of the spades. He was certain this time that he was listening to some act of dreadful ritual.

It ceased at last, and soon the men were gone. The dark heap of corpses which had lain between him and the grave-diggers remained in his mind until morning. At dawn he crawled over the elephant track to the burial ground. It had been no dream. The earth was newly-dug, and the graves were sufficiently far from the road to be unremarked by merchants going by, especially during times when people minded their own affairs for fear of trouble. Nevertheless—another very disquieting feature—it was amazing how little disturbed the dug-over ground looked to be.

Next morning the headman, having heard the story from the babu, came with a cart and took Lovat back to the village. He did not find him near the burying-ground. Lovat had crawled back to the stream.

"I would have come last night and sought for you, but I was away from home and did not know that you were missing," the headman said, in apology.

Lovat did not believe that he had been from home until he happened to see the palms of his hands. They were curiously calloused, he thought, for a man who did not even do his own ploughing. Rashly, he made some jesting comment, but the headman laughed, and, when they were back in the village, massaged his injured leg.

(3)

The harvest came, and feasts were held. All the village went gay. The rains came, the ploughing and sowing were done—all the rhythm of the farmer's year swung slowly and inevitably through its orbit. News of the factory—strongly fortified, now, against the Marathas—came in, as bazaar news does, unofficial, but mainly and uncannily correct. The spring, with its soft winds, was beautiful. Shiva's altar, almost neglected during the rainy months, was painted afresh with red mud, and the women scattered the petals of flowers before it. To Lovat the great lump of stone—the emblem was merely a rounded boulder gathered out of the river—was ugly and meaningless. Fertility rites amused and slightly disgusted him.

All the evening lute-players strummed in the village; drummers came to the feasts; there was everywhere an undercurrent of excitement such as, he began to think, a tree must feel when the spring-time sap begins to run, or a river must feel, released in the melting of the snows.

He himself, insensibly at first, and despising the god who (Indians thought) was working the magic in him, gradually succumbed to the voiceless urgings of

spring. He sat in the shade of trees and whistled melancholy folk-songs of England. Tunes he thought he had forgotten, cadences he did not know that he knew, came fluting forth with an ease that reminded the women loitering to hear him—their empty pitchers dangling at their knees or their full baskets balanced upon their heads—of Krishna piping to milkmaids, of a bird when the rains were over, a morning bird that closed its wings and sang from the heart of the woods. They made love to him in their artless, simple-hearted way. Their religion allowed it, custom approved it, his beauty and kindness demanded it. But Lovat only laughed at their frankness and freedom, helped them scatter their flower-petals and make the the other offerings to Shiva. Once he caught one and kissed her. After that they left him alone, but giggled still when they saw him. There was one girl who used to hide behind a tree when she saw him coming. She would peep out after him shyly when he had passed. Lovat could not help but notice these modest but unmistakable advances, for they were much more attractive to him than the others' boldness, and one day he stood still beside the tree, said nothing, and watched to see what she would do. She fled, with a clinking of anklets, but when he went round to the other side of the tree he found, as he had expected, a flower on the ground. He picked it up, looked it over, and then tossed it negligently away. He had made up his mind not to think any more about her, but he was amused by and half-sentimental about the girl and her solitary flower.

He saw no more of her for three days ; then, one morning he was awakened by the sound of the temple

bell—he did not sleep so long as a general rule, but had sat up the night before drinking palm toddy, forbidden to the headman as a Moslem, but sometimes offered to his guests. He went for a walk in the cool morning air before commencing work. He walked out through the village to Shiva's altar, and found it in the possession of a solitary worshipper who was giving it a fresh coat of mud. He recognised the girl, and stepped behind a tree. When she had plastered the symbol and was praying before it, he came up behind her, waiting until she turned to go away. She knew he was there, deliberately kept him waiting, and turned at last, her hand to her mouth and her dark eyes alight with a mixture of fright and fun. Lovat put his arms around her, and kissed her, English fashion, and held her when she cried out and tried to escape. He said :

“Is the altar of Shiva the only place of worship?”

“No,” she answered, then trembled, and dropped her eyes, and added, “there is also the *temple* of Shiva.”

“And that is all?” he continued, trying to tease her into explaining the play upon words. She smiled and fluttered in his arms like a bird attempting to escape. “Tell me,” he commanded her. “What other temples are there in the village?”

“There be none—in *this* village,” she replied, refusing to join in the joke. So Lovat kissed her again, and let her go. She fled like a hare, graceful as a fawn, the ends of her coloured sari flying as she ran on bare feet. She was not a woman of the plains; she ~~came~~—or her people did—from the hills, he was fairly certain.

He walked back slowly to the village. He was lonely and young, and he reminded himself that many of the Company's agents had taken Indian wives. He had seen, in the quarters outside the walls of the settlement, the families of dark-eyed children, children of mixed blood whom the Company proposed to retain in its service and train. Some people thought that the mixed unions were a good sign, and would cement friendship between the English and the Indians. The French, the Portuguese and the Dutch had done the same thing with results that, at that time, nobody could prophesy, but which did not appear to be harmful.

Lovat, however, too thin-blooded to be the victim of his lusts, remembered that, on the other hand, the English factors had the habit of taking their Indian riches back to England, but of leaving their wives in India. So the madness passed, but he felt sufficient interest in the girl to make enquiries about her.

"She will have no dowry, and she is not a virgin," said the headman. Lovat understood from this that the headman was not in favour of the match, so he went to the village barber.

"I want you to make me a good marriage," he said. The barber—matchmaker and priest's assistant when required—offered him a choice of several low-caste girls, all of whom Lovat had seen at one time or another, and, finding his customer uninterested, said at last :

"The one you are seeking in marriage is not for you."

Lovat was not in the least surprised to hear that the whole village knew of the kisses by the shrine of Shiva, and answered, unperturbed :

“ But if I will have no other ? ”

The barber looked perplexed, and attended to a customer whilst he thought out a suitable reply. When the customer had been dealt with, he remarked :

“ When my lord shall lie down with Bhowani, then my lord shall lie down with that girl.”

“ Who is Bhowani ? ” asked Lovat. “ Sati I know, and Kali, Parbati, and Lakshmi. Bhowani I do not know.” The barber shrugged and smiled.

“ There is no Bhowani,” he replied. It was about a week after this that the girl disappeared from the village. It was an unaccountable happening, unless she had been murdered, and there seemed to be no evidence of that. Lovat made enquiries, not only in his own village, but also all round the neighbourhood but he could obtain no news of her. The next occurrence, equally mysterious, was a wave of incendiarism which came upon the village. On three different occasions houses caught on fire and were burnt to the ground. The third time that this happened, nearly half the village was burnt, and all next day the homeless could be seen bringing in thatch for their roofs, make their houses habitable again.

“ Why doesn't the watchman find out how these fires begin ? ” Lovat asked the headman. The answer he got was evasive. Two nights later his house was burgled, but the only thing that was taken was his sword. His money was buried under the floor and was safe. He had no store of grain, for he fed at the house of the headman. He had had the village carpenter make him a wooden door for his hut, but it did not lock, it merely hung on a latch. The thief had made a hole in the mud wall, lifted the latch from

inside, and stolen the sword from its place by the side of the bed. Lovat himself, muffled against mosquito bites, had heard nothing.

Annoyed, he caught the watchman and gave him a beating. Then he went to his day's work. The peasants held their lands in a collection of small holdings. Each of these was sometimes not more than twenty yards square ; sometimes it covered several acres. Part of the work which Lovat did was to keep the tally of these small-holdings, for disputes were common, and the written records of the village accountant were the last court of appeal. Trouble began, very often, between brothers when the father died. To divide the inheritance equally among the sons was the usual way of leaving property, and the heirs quarrelled over the various allotments, for the fertility of the land varied.

On that particular morning a vexed case came up for settlement. A man called Bhota had died and his small-holding—a matter of less than twenty acres all told—was to be shared among three sons. It was in the form of five fields—all arable land—but of these there were two on rich alluvial soil near the river, two on slightly higher ground, and one on the edge of the forest. The eldest son claimed the first two fields by the river, and suggested that his brothers should take one each of the second best, and work the poor forest field alternately or together. The other brothers would not agree to this. They were prepared to let the eldest have two fields, but they wanted him to accept the two on rising ground, and let them share the best and the worst.

The father had made no definite arrangements.

Apparently he was a simple old man who thought that all three would work the land together, and share equally in the produce. The headman—who was not the hereditary accountant to the village, but had taken on the job when the real man died of cholera, and all his household with him—passed the affair to Lovat.

“If these were my own people I would know what to do,” he said. “But these Hindu unbelievers have their own thoughts, and you must learn them.”

Lovat tried to persuade the men to work the fields together, and, promised that if, after the first harvest (there were two harvests a year off the alluvial soil of the province), they did not find that the arrangement was satisfactory, he would go to Murchidabad and find remedy for their troubles.

The Hindus declined to regard this as a settlement, and went off, grumbling, to their houses. Next morning, Lovat, up early, watched them go off with their ploughs. The Bengal plough was a primitive implement made of a strip of hard wood with an iron tip. No furrow could be made with it; it merely scratched the surface of the ground, which had to be ploughed over two or three times to make sure that none had been missed. The eldest son had a bullock yoke, as well, upon his shoulder. His brothers stalked beside him, one on either side. No conversation passed among the three.

There were other disputes to be settled that morning, so Lovat worked on, and thought no more about Bhota's heirs until noon, when he stood up, stretched his cramped legs, hounded the rest of the disputants from his presence, and walked over to the headman's house for a meal.

Two wailing women were in the courtyard. They ran to Lovat when they saw him, and began, in shrill tones, to pour out a complicated story. Their husbands had gone to the fields that morning and there had been an argument between them and the three sons of Bhota. Now the eldest son of Bhota lay dead, and the other two sons had come up to where the two husbands were ploughing with bullocks, had beaten the husbands, called them murderers, and accused them of killing the eldest brother. The headman and the watchman and some more friends of Bhota's sons (said the women) had come up and arrested their two husbands, and had locked them up in the headman's house.

"And did they kill Bhota's eldest son?" asked Lovat, who had listened patiently.

"Oh, no," the women asserted eagerly. "Of course his two brothers killed him. Everybody knows that."

"If that is true, the brothers will be punished. You women go to your homes. There will be justice for the evil-doers and justice for the wrongly accused, you can be sure," said Lovat.

The headman's younger brother came out when the women had gone.

"The killing was done with your sword," he said to Lovat. He produced it. "If we knew who stole this from your house whilst you were asleep, we should know who the murderers were."

"I cannot agree," said Lovat. He took the sword and examined it. It had been wiped clean of blood.

"Where is the dead man?"

"They are going to burn his body this evening. He is in his house."

"Who killed him? His brothers, do you think?"

"It may be. God only knows. None of these Hindus ever tell the truth. It may be that the quarrel broke out, as his brothers affirm, with these men whom the people have locked up."

"But if the brothers did it, won't they escape to-night? Won't they attempt to leave the village?"

"It is not likely. They have nowhere to go. Their property is here. They will stay."

"What happens to murderers?"

"I do not know what the law says, but my brother the headman kills them. He makes them kneel down with their hands tied, and then he cuts off their heads. It is a good way, and easy for them."

Lovat was uncomfortably aware that the young man was giving him a warning. "They will make an enquiry, then?" he said. The young man raised his hands in a fatalistic gesture.

"You do not understand, it seems," he said. "I wish to be your friend, and all I can tell you is that there will be an enquiry. Yes," he concluded meditatively, while Lovat studied his handsome aquiline face, "there will be an enquiry, and everybody will lie."

This pessimism proved to be well-founded. The court was held in the compound of the headman's house, and there, hour after hour, for three whole days, the enquiry went on whilst the funeral pyre of the victim dropped in grey ash, and Lovat sweated and scribbled; scribbled, sweated and swore. He and all the witnesses were pestered by mosquitoes and gnats, sworn statements contradicted other sworn statements, witnesses went back on what they had said on the previous day, the defence established two

excellent but mutually contradictory alibis, and the prosecution perjured itself half a dozen times at least in an afternoon.

"Now, we finish," said the headman at last. "You read all, and tell me who is guilty. I trust you. You will tell me the correct judgment. I have confidence in your ability. You are a very clever fellow."

Lovat took the evidence to bed with him and slept on it—literally—in case it should be stolen. That night his hut caught fire again. He was awakened by his own coughing. Smoke filled the room. The thatch was a sheet of fire. He gathered up the evidence and his sword, and collided with two dark figures in the doorway. They held lathis, and barred his progress. Lovat recognised them. They were the brothers of the dead man. He struck at them with the sword, and they fled away, squealing. Furiously angry, he stood outside and watched his hut burn until it was a red-hot ruin. No other houses were near, but the people had all run for water, and were waiting to put out the fire at the first sign it gave of spreading.

Lovat did not fetch water. He went to the headman's house as soon as the flames died down. The household there was astir. A village fire brought everybody out, in case other houses were in danger. Even the Moslem women were clustered on the steps of their quarters, and a twittering of conversation greeted him as he entered the compound and walked towards the house. The headman was standing with his kinsmen and his brother, and called to Lovat :

"Who did it? Is it your house again?"

"The man's brothers did it," Lovat answered.
"They tried to burn the records."

"We will see about that in the morning. Is the fire likely to spread?"

"No, I do not think it will spread this time," Lovat answered. "You must take charge of the evidence. Here it is. Those men tried to stop me when I escaped from my house. They must have set fire to it, meaning to burn the records, and to kill me if they could. Without doubt you must find them guilty."

"I cannot agree," said the headman. "We shall need to think carefully all of to-morrow. Perhaps some other days, also, we shall need to give to this problem. It is very curious. Why should your sword have been stolen? *Was* it stolen? That is what I ask myself, and that is what people ask me. As for the barber, he is dead. I will show you his head in the morning. Come into the house and sleep. You have no house. That is twice you have had no house. I ask myself the reason. What is the reason? Can you tell me? Go you in, therefore, and sleep. The barber, I tell you, is dead."

Lovat could make but little of this harangue. He shrugged, and swaggered carelessly into the house. His heart was beating fast, however. He remembered that these were the people who had been so anxious to drive him away before. If there was going to be an attempt to pin the murder of Bhota's eldest son on him, and kill him for it, he could not see how to save himself except by running away. He did not think he would get very far if he fled. As for evidence, he knew enough of Indians to realise that if the evidence conflicted with what they wanted to believe, the evidence would be disregarded entirely. He decided to make an appeal. The people must know that he

was innocent, no matter what the headman had to say. As soon as it began to get light he walked back to his smouldering hut. A little throng of villagers had collected. The dawn was breaking, and against the pale light the people looked hobgoblin. In the morning stillness their silence was disquieting. He said :

"Who will hear me? Listen! His brothers killed Bhota's son. Why should I kill him? I had no grudge against him. I worked all day in the shed in Jahir Khan's courtyard, and all of you know I did. I was never in the fields to kill him. He talks foolishness who accuses me of this deed."

"Brothers do not kill brothers," said a voice.

"You should know, Jundra," said another. There was general giggling, but Lovat did not know the joke which apparently lay behind the words. The sky brightened. The village took on colour. Beyond it the saturated fields, in which the cultivators were splashed from chest to knees with the rich brown mud as their oxen tramped before the ploughs, shone in the sunshine, as the standing water, several inches deep, reflected back the light. The sky was pale blue, a tender, limpid colour, with wisps of morning cloud.

The villagers began to drift away. Soon from the byres came the oxen, driven to the fields for work. Their owners, shouldering the sixteen-pound ploughs and the wooden yokes, walked with them.

Lovat fled the opposite way, past the mud wall which guarded the headman's house, and out to the waste land where stood the altar of Shiva. The rounded boulder, symbol of life and creation, was no more solitary than it had been the last time he had come

to it from the village. The girl was there again. This time she lay before it, sprawled unmaidenly, her sari half off, her brown limbs twisted, one arm obviously broken. A cloud of flies rose from her head, and a vulture took sagging flight, as Lovat, sick to the heart, went up to look at her.

Chapter Seven



(1)

HE STEPPED CLOSER TO THE BODY BUT DID NOT TOUCH it. He could not bear to look long. He glanced round and saw two men, and waved his arms and called on them to come ; but the villagers turned and fled. He was not surprised at this, for almost all Hindus are defiled if they touch a dead body, and he did not expect that the villagers would carry the girl to her house. But their sudden exodus from the scene had another, more sinister meaning. It meant that they knew of the death and, moreover, they were witnesses now that he had been seen beside the body. He remembered, with a painful sensation of fear, the silent group at his house ; the acceptance by all of the lying suggestion that he was already a murderer ; that his flight would need to be speeded up if he were to make his escape.

Panic took him. He turned and began to run away from the village. But on the farther side of the second small field he came upon water too wide to leap, too deep to ford. He cast up and down the bank, sweating, trapped and anguished (for he knew what dreadful deeds a roused peasantry in that country of ill-balanced lusts and passions could perform, for the people were pitiless as the tigers that roamed the jungles). He ran at last to his left, as that seemed to lead away from the village huts. His eye could follow the winding river before him, for its course was marked by trees. He

made good speed, but the headman had been too cunning, and it was not long before he saw that his way was barred by a concourse of people with lathis. They were led by Hussein, the brother of the headman, who was mounted on a restless, head-flicking pony.

Lovat turned and doubled back. The wide sky, the green land, the brassy, intolerable sun seemed suddenly hideous and his foes. The sky and the flat earth betrayed him to his pursuers, and the sun was now hot enough to make all this running unendurable. He began to sob for breath, and could hear, he thought, the hoof-beats of Hussein's pony coming closer. Then he was aware that a boatful of villagers was landing in front of him, and that this band was led by the headman. There was no real fight. He put up the best resistance that he could, but the men with lathis surrounded him, yelling and clubbing, and soon he was beaten insensible. Stunned and terribly bruised, he was dragged to the headman's house and flung inside a small shed that stood in the compound.

He came to, aching and sick. His head throbbed, every bone in his body was tender. The shed was dark, but a crack of light came in where the door fitted badly. He crawled to the crack and gave the door a couple of miserably feeble kicks. It fell open, being flimsily hung, but a couple of men with swords were standing outside, and menaced him by flashing the swords in the sun. He withdrew, and they pushed the door shut.

The shed grew gradually hotter. He was sick again, several times. The stench was unpleasant. Flies crawled in through the cracks, the red ants bit him, and mosquitoes hummed in the darkness. Sometimes he could hear voices. Sometimes everything

was silent except for the sounds of the insects and his own loud, laboured breathing. He began to suffer from thirst, and kicked the door again. Again it fell open. This time there was no one outside. His guards had grown tired of their task and had walked off to sit in the shade, chew betel, and gossip with the headman's outdoor servants.

Lovat got to his feet. He felt weak and his bruises were painful, but he managed to reach the well. Brass vessels stood beside it. He dipped one in and drank. Then he bathed his face and dabbed it dry on his turban, sat down in the shade of a banyan tree close by, leaned against the trunk and fell asleep. There his guards found him later, and woke him up. They did not take him back to the shed, but into the headman's house. Here, to his great surprise, he was given a bed. His bruises were smeared with clarified butter. He was given more water to drink, and was offered food.

Next morning he found, when he woke, that his ankles were fastened. The headman's brother, Hussein, squatted beside his bed, a sword across his knees. He turned as soon as Lovat stirred, and grinned at him, and called through the curtained doorway.

Two servants came and untied Lovat's feet. They raised him up—he found he could hardly stir; his bruises had made him stiff. His head still ached. He touched it and winced, for lumps and swellings had been raised on it by the heavy, iron-bound lathis. A cut on his forehead which had bled, and which he had bathed as he sat beside the well, had bled again in the night. The servants brought food, and some water. He ate a little, drank all the water, and then lay down

again and slept for several hours. When he awoke it was well past the middle of the day, but the room, without windows, was pleasantly cool and dim.

His guard had been changed whilst he slept. This time the headman himself was seated beside the bed. He said, as soon as Lovat opened his eyes :

“ Why did you do it ? Why do you kill our people ? ”

The hollow-eyed and haggard boy sat up, grimacing with pain.

“ You know,” he replied, “ you *must* know, Zemindar, that I have done no injury to anyone.”

“ There is an Englishman dead in Kalikata,” the headman said, with a sidelong look, but without a change of expression. “ What of him ? ”

Lovat said nothing. He knew how tidings travelled from village to village, and was not surprised to learn that Palton's death was known and was laid (and truly laid) at his door. “ And now,” the headman continued, leaning forward and speaking softly, “ in my village where all the people are good people, and where we have had no crime, no violent deeds, no hatred of any for any, no feuds, no angry arguments, the son of Bhota is killed, the little daughter of Chundra is ravished, and then this woman, dedicated to the temple of the unbelievers and regarded as holy by them—upon whom I spit ”—he did so—“ this woman, I say, is killed. What can you say about this ? There is nothing that anyone can say. This wickedness was not known before you came. I pronounce, before Allah, by Whom came compassion and peace, that you are a very bad man.”

“ You can't prove her death was my fault,” said Lovat feebly. He knew that he ought to speak loudly

and angrily, and intimidate this rascally Moham-medan. He was only an Indian—only an Indian, thought Lovat, indistinctly and with swimmingly aching head, and all the merchants at the English settlement had said that Indians, whether Moslem or Hindu, were very easily intimidated. Many of them, especially when they were drunk, could give excellent and very humorous examples of how easily intimidated all the Indians were. Why, was it not a fact that a few years before Job Charnock founded Calcutta, the English had almost decided to leave Bengal because of the difficulties they encountered? And then it had dawned upon them—he smiled weakly as his eyes began to close again in sleep—that the Indians——

The headman watched him. Then he bent down and listened to his heavy, regular breathing, put a thin hand on his forehead, and, turning his head, called a request very softly through the doorway for his brother Hussein to come and take his place.

In this young Moslem, handsome, bold and merry, lay Lovat's chief hope of safety, and Lovat liked well what he knew of his nature, and would have been prepared to trust in him.

Hussein watched the sleeping youth for a time; then he went to the doorway, parted the curtains, came back, as though reassured, and woke Lovat with a touch.

"Stay awake," he said, in a whisper, "and listen to me. How much do you know? What have the foolish ones told you?"

"What about?"

"About what goes on. Tell me what you have learned, for I am your friend. They mean to kill

you, but I shall not let it be done if you will promise now to join us."

"Can I trust you, Hussein? You and your brother have played me false. You have beaten and wounded me. I don't know what to tell you. You have made me afraid to utter my thoughts."

"I know. But I am your friend."

"If you are my friend you must speak for me at the judgment. You know I did not kill Bhota's son, nor the woman who was found before Shiva's altar."

"We all know that. But we have our own safety to think of. It is the—it is what you have seen that concerns us. When the times comes, promise me you will join us. I will speak for you then. Call loudly upon our Bhowani. That will help you. I know you have heard of Bhowani. Did we not kill the barber?"

He left him to think it over, and to sleep. At night they pinioned him again and thrust him once more into the empty shed, but towards the break of the morning someone stood outside, and whispered, whispered, whispered. Lovat crawled up to the door and listened, but did not put his ear to the crack, for fear of getting a dagger point through his head.

"Speak louder," he said. "I am here."

It was a woman's voice that he heard. It repeated one sentence, over and over again until he had grasped what it was.

"He says you must promise to join them. Promise to join them. Promise to join them," said the voice. "I dare not stay. Do you hear me, and understand?"

"I understand, pearl," he replied; but he did not, and he lay and pondered the mysterious remark

and thought over Hussein's previous entreaties whilst day brightened and the village woke and homeless dogs came sniffing about the hut.

They dragged him out at noon, in the most powerful heat of the day. His arms were still pinioned and he was suffering agonies from cramp. They were neither harsh nor rough—disquieting signs, he thought. Without threats, gently, as though he were a sacrifice, they brought him before the headman, who sat in state, in the middle of his own high-walled compound, under a tree. To Lovat's surprise, only a few of the villagers were present, but there were a dozen to twenty strangers standing by.

The headman greeted him by bowing. Lovat, surprised, bowed back. Then out of the house came two servants, bearing a sack of hot ashes. He had heard from the factors of this torture. The bag would be pressed down over his head and the string drawn tightly about his neck. Then the servants would thump him on the back until his gaspings would make him inhale the hot ash. With his head blistered and burned, his mouth parched until he could scarcely breathe, he would be left to lie in the sun without water, until he choked, or went mad.

He felt panic possessing his faculties. He could not see ; there was a drumming in his ears ; he was trembling and his throat was suddenly dry. Then, as though he was looking at him through a mist, he saw Hussein, who was signalling him. He pulled himself together, and cried out :

“ Have done with this folly of treating me as though I were your foe. Let me join you. I call upon Bhowani, your own Bhowani, to aid me ! ”

The pitiless sun blazed down on his dark, unturbaned head. He felt himself growing faint. But somebody flung a thick piece of jute cloth over him. Then Hussein untied his hands, and the servants chafed his arms until he could scarcely bear the exquisite agony of the unfettered blood as the feeling came back to his members, and, except that two men, at a nod from the headman, guarded him, he was free.

Much discussion went on, but very little acrimonious argument. At last the headman came to him and said :

“Tell us what you have seen.”

Lovat chanced it.

“Buryings at night or just before the dawn. A heap of corpses. Money being buried beneath the courtyard here.”

“And whom have you told about these things?”

“Who is there to tell? You all know me. I can never go back to my people. Who else is there to tell?”

(2)

The initiation ceremony fell upon a festival day. Both Hindus and Mohammedans, Lovat was interested to observe, appeared to be members of the secret society whose ranks he was to join. They ordered him to wash in the river, and then gave him new, unbleached clothes to put on. When he was dressed, he was taken to the headman's house. A clean white cloth was spread in the middle of the floor of a fair-sized room, and the headman, rising to receive him, enquired of the assembled company whether they were willing to receive Lovat as a brother. There was a general shout of approval.

The next part of the ceremony took place in the open air. He was taken out by the headman, and, followed by the whole band, some of whom were not men of that village but strangers whom he had never seen before his trial, was led to a space at the edge of the cultivated fields where there were one or two trees. Here the procession stood still. Lovat was taken a little apart from the rest, and then the headman, bidding him listen intently, began to recite a prayer to Bhowani, beseeching her to receive the new member as one of her favoured servants. There was a pause ; then a bird flew shrieking out of one of the trees. Its flight was acclaimed by all. The omens, it appeared, were favourable.

Then the party went back to the headman's house. This time, in the apartment with the white cloth spread on the floor, was a pickaxe of the kind which Lovat had seen in use in preparing the graves by the river. A white cloth was put into his right hand. Incantations were recited over it and over him. Then the pickaxe was placed upon the cloth he held, so that he grasped it, but not directly. More incantations followed, and then he was instructed to raise the pickaxe as high as his breast, and his left hand high in the air to invoke the goddess. Repeating the words after the headman, he took an oath of service to Bhowani. Then—where it had come from he did not know, nor did it ever transpire—a missal, stolen, no doubt, from some Jesuit missionary to the court of the Moslem emperor, was placed for Lovat to lay his hand on it. He did so, in the pious Protestant certainty that an oath so taken could not be binding on a Church of England conscience—for, although his mother,

Alice Cleave, after the fashion of all the females of her line, remained a Catholic, Sir William had, rather thankfully changed back to the reformed faith after the Revolution—and swore mightily by the book to keep his promises.

The company seemed satisfied. He was handed a piece of unrefined sugar—obviously the consecrated food of this extraordinary society—and so became, with this last ceremony, a member of the band.

He still did not know for what purpose these men—Hindus for the most part, but having a fair number—perhaps a fifth of their number—Moslems—were gathered, except that it had something to do with the burials he had seen. The headman soon enlightened him.

“Now,” he said with satisfaction, when the band had dispersed and he was seated with Lovat in a shady angle of the courtyard, “the sacred cloth.”

He took from his waistband a strip of thin material like a handkerchief, very strongly woven, and said to Lovat :
“Kneel down.”

Lovat knelt. In less than a second the handkerchief was twisted round his neck, his eyes were almost starting out of his head, and he felt himself choking.

The headman removed the handkerchief, sat smiling, whilst Lovat caressed his neck and got his breath again, then said :

“We shall see now whether you will make a strangler. Take the handkerchief and try.”

He clapped his hands, and, pointing to the servant who entered, commanded :

“Try your hand on him.”

The servant looked terrified, but the headman,

giving him a gentle kick, told him to kneel and to clasp his hands behind him. The frightened man obeyed. Lovat looked at the handkerchief, then at the fellow's scrawny neck. He shook his head.

"That is not a test," he said. "The man I try my hand on is to be an enemy, not the servant of my host ; he is to be strong, determined, armed ; not a poor, terrified wretch who does not know whether I may go too far or pull too tight, and kill him by mistake."

The headman signed to the servant, and, scrambling up, the man bowed to them both, and hurried out.

"You must tell me first," said Lovat, "the meaning of all I have seen ; you must make clear to me all that I have heard. I walk in darkness. I do not know what I am to do, nor why I am to do it. Are we dacoits ? Do we plunder and rob ? Who are our enemies ? Why am I made the servant of the goddess Bhowani, and who is this goddess ?"

"She is Kali," the headman answered. "We are all her worshippers. Even I, follower of the Prophet, than whom is no prophet so great, bow also to Bhowani, goddess of death, drinker of blood, thirsty one, unassuaged, protectress of us her devotees."

"And you kill people ?"

"In her name and for her glory."

"It is madness."

"Yes, it is a kind of madness." The headman sipped sherbet and nodded to Lovat to do the same. Another servant, not the one on whom Lovat was to have made his first attempt at thuggee, had brought in the sweet, northern beverage. "We also rob. We are rich men, all of us. Some of the proceeds of our exploits are given to the goddess. We keep up

her temples and buy bloodstock, men and beasts, to be offered at her sacred altars. But that is the concern of the unbelievers, although even we men of Islam are willing to please this goddess, for her worship is older by many hundreds of years than the true faith later vouchsafed to us."

"And you bury your victims after you have strangled and robbed them?"

"Yes, indeed we do."

"Then that is what I have seen?"

"Even so, a Thug burying. For long we have debated whether to kill you as we kill our victims, or whether to give you the opportunity to join our band and make one with us."

"And how did you come to this decision?"

"We lost the man who used to value our takings. Now you are accustomed to handling valuable goods. You must have seen many fine and rare and beautiful and very costly things at the English factory. You will know the prices that our men should ask in the bazaars. For, you will understand, my friend, that we want to ask neither too much nor too little for what we gain. If we ask too much we shall be laughed at; and if too little, everybody will say: 'The goods are stolen goods; otherwise these fellows would demand the proper price.'"

"I see," said Lovat. He rested his chin on his hand and studied the pattern of beaten brass on the tray which the servant had brought.

"Also," the headman went on, clapping his hands for opium, "we know that you are honest and will not cheat us. I have watched you closely all the time you have been in my service. You have done well for

yourself, but never by robbing me. You are quick and keen over a bargain, but I have never been defrauded of my dues. Neither have I gained anything since you have been in my service, for you are bold and proud, and do not seek to acquire favour. That is a good sign."

Lovat stirred a Bokhara rug with his shoe.

"I have joined you to save my life," he said. "When do you—*still* I do not understand what it is you do."

"That is a lie," the Moslem headman observed. "You know what we do, none better. We are the Stranglers. To the unbelievers it is a religion; to us, the enlightened, it is still a religion of a sort. Great riches will be yours now that you have joined us."

"I did not know, when I took the oath to Bhowani what it was that I had to do."

"But you will keep the oath. There is no question of it. To-night we have work. After to-night there will be nothing that you do not understand."

Feeling himself dismissed, Lovat went back to his hut. There was his curved sword stuck point downwards in the ground. His hut had been freshly sprinkled, there was freshly-ground food on the threshold. Inside the hut, in the shade, was a brass vessel filled with water.

He cooked some food for himself in clarified butter, doctored the water with palm toddy, and lay down on his bed to rest. He fell asleep, but his dreams were so horrible that he woke up shouting as though he had nightmare. As nearly all the villagers cried out constantly in their sleep, his shouting caused no commotion.

Chapter Eight

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(I)

THE DAYS AND THE WEEKS WENT BY. RAINY JULY, with her heavy black clouds and her torrents, flooding the villages until all the arable fields were submerged and only the houses, the bamboo clumps and the tall trees stood up like islands out of the surrounding silted sea of dark brown and world-hiding water, came and went, and bright birds perched upon dripping stems amid the floods, and sang their songs of triumph at the sight of the sun. Winter slipped away and April came, and it was not until the delightful days of the spring that Lovat heard of any activity among his new-found brethren and companions.

Then one night he got up to go outside and was plucked by the arm and told to catch up his sword and present himself without delay. He obeyed, and soon was following three dark figures, and one white-garmented ghostly one, along the narrow village street between the houses whose doorsteps were raised a couple of feet above flood level and most of whose inhabitants were sleeping in the middle of the road.

Soon the party came to the edge of the river, and here, beneath a tree, the rest of the band were waiting. No conference was held; it was evident that all the plans had been made. The men were divided into groups. Boats were manned, and very shortly the expedition was being rowed upstream.

Lovat's sword was not the only weapon the company possessed. He saw several men with knives, and the headman had an armoury of sword and daggers about him as well as the sinister handkerchief, the true weapons of the Thugs, which, as he sat, he kept twisting round his fingers, ankles and wrists.

No one spoke on the journey. The river darkly flowed with scarcely a gleam on its surface to mark that it was water. Darker than the night, a cluster of shadows on the bank, near which they kept, would occasionally mark a village, a clump of trees, or a temple with steps to the river, and a dull red glow, higher than the level of the water, a smouldering funeral pyre.

After about an hour of steady rowing, the oarsmen pulled in to the side near a small group of trees, there was a slight bump as the boat that Lovat was in touched the muddy bank, and then the band jumped for the shore and tied up the boat. The other craft followed the first one, and bundles and bales were disembarked and carried under the trees. Here the headman and others changed their clothes. The garments they had been wearing were made into bundles, put back into the boats, and those who had rowed the boats cast off again, and silently floated downstream.

By this time it was dawn. The sky began to lighten, morning cloud appeared, faintly pink against the grey, and soon the sun was up. Food was served out to the company, Hindus and Mohammedans eating separately and Lovat with the Mohammedans, and then a forced march began. It was trying and very tiring, especially after the sun was high and the day

began to be hot. But, led by the headman and a Hindu whom Lovat had not seen until the ceremony of the initiation had taken place, the band pressed on through wide, flat country, all the time skirting cultivated land, until, in the early afternoon, as Lovat was beginning to think he should have to give up the march for very exhaustion, they came to a mud-walled town.

Their change of clothing had made a considerable difference in the appearance of the devotees of Bhowani. The headman, who had retained his weapons, now had the appearance of a Mogul chieftain on a journey. The rest of the band might be taken for his followers, Lovat thought. All wore their weapons openly, and Lovat, who had not been given a change of clothing, still retained the respectable garb of a merchant, his accustomed dress since he had been clerk and accountant to the headman. He kept his sword, however, and the fine weapon in its embroidered sheath did not, on so young and handsome a man, even though his dress was not war-like, look particularly out of place.

The party entered by a gate in the mud wall, and walked leisurely towards the bazaar. The chief employment of the place was weaving, and the weavers sat at their occupation in nearly every doorway, and looked up only casually at the travellers as they passed.

The bazaar was noisy and busy. Every kind of industry was represented there, the goods being manufactured and then sold direct to the buyers, of whom there seemed a good number. A crowd of people jostled, argued, gossiped and bargained at every

booth and stall, the sounds made by the metal-workers and potters mingled with the shoutings of men urging camels, horses and oxen along the street, and the bleating of sheep and the whinnying cry of goats were but feeble noises amid the general hubbub.

A Hindu town, the place had no inns because of the difficulties of catering for different degrees of the people, and the consequent risk of pollution for those of the higher castes, so the usual lodging for travellers was a disused shop in the bazaar, or, for Moslems, entertainment at the houses of their co-religionists. Enquiry elicited that the only empty shop had been acquired as a lodging-house by three Hindu merchants who were waiting for a suitable escort to go north with them to Benares.

"And when is this escort expected?" the headman asked. The Mohammedan butcher to whom he put the question replied that it was believed in the bazaar that the merchants were not anticipating the coming of a prearranged escort, but were to remain in the village until they were fortunate enough to fall in with other people who were travelling their way.

"Would they be prepared to *pay* for an escort, if one offered?" the headman demanded.

"They are rich men," the Mohammedan replied. The headman nodded.

"And I, although I travel armed and with servants, am not a rich man, brother," he observed.

"If you will accept hospitality, huzoor," said the butcher, bowing, "I shall be honoured by giving you the meagre comfort of my poor roof."

The headman accepted the offer immediately, and, turning to Lovat, remarked :

"See how different are the feelings of us Moslems from the cumbersome rules of caste which prevail among unbelievers. This man is not my equal in rank, it is true, but under our law, praise be to God to whom all the faithful owe allegiance because He has shown us the right way, all Mohammedans are equal and all have the same expectations of the good life to come. May you enjoy the seventy hours in Paradise, friend," he added, turning to the butcher. "I go but to interview these infidels, and then I shall come again."

"Go in the mercy of God," the butcher replied. Then, having spat upon the place where Lovat's feet had been, not scornfully but as a pious duty, he turned to and cut up a sheep which had been done to death some short time earlier and was already beginning to smell.

(2)

Lovat wandered about the town in idleness for the rest of the day. He soon left the bazaar and came upon a little street of houses. The place was scarcely large enough to be called a town, and narrow passages between rows of huts, whose lean-to thatch cast deep, dark shadows on the roadways, led him to the well. Here was gathered the usual crowd of men and women, watering cattle, cleaning their teeth, gossiping, laughing, quarrelling, drawing water for household use. Over the well hung the thick-leaved branches of a tree, and through its foliage the sky peered, beautifully blue.

A girl gave Lovat a drink, pouring the water in a delicate trickle of flashing light from the vessel she

held into his round-cupped hands. He thanked her, and stayed where he was to watch her go, her anklets clinking, her head, well poised on her thin, brown neck, never turning to give him a backward glance as she walked towards her home. He loitered at the well a quarter of an hour or so, liking the company and the shade, the sound of voices, the jests, the village scandal.

Then he went back to the bazaar, but, seeing nothing of his travelling companions, he walked back among the huts to rest. Many of the men had brought their beds into the roadway, and were peacefully sleeping. Some of the wives stood over them, or squatted near, fanning them against the heat and the flies. Some of the houses had a kind of porch on to the roadway formed by the slant of thatch which was propped up on poles. Finding one of these porches unoccupied, Lovat sat down in the shade and took stock of the circumstances in which he found himself. Lacking the resolution so soon to run from the Thugs and trust that they would not chase him and recapture him, he made himself a promise that, come what might, he would not assist them in any deeds of violence. He proposed to display no skill in the manipulation of the deadly piece of cloth with which it was their custom, it seemed, to strangle all their victims. He had had more than enough of killings, and promised himself that the limit of his assistance in the thuggee would be to help dig the graves.

This, it seemed, coincided with the headman's own ideas, for, just at sundown, when the Thugs, by prearrangement, were to meet, the headman informed the band that he had persuaded the Hindu merchants

to accept the escort of himself and his followers for fear of danger from robbers, and that some of the band, whom he named, were to leave the village immediately and reconnoitre for the best place for the surprise attack and for the interment of the corpses.

"You, Englishman," he said to Lovat, "had better accompany the grave-diggers. We must not trust your hand in the more blessed part of the work until you are better practised. Take him with you, Moti," he added to a Hindu. "You know where we left the tools for the work. Dig deep and see that there is no chance of your being overlooked as you carry out your work."

"Do you, then, dig the graves before you know how many men you will kill?" Lovat enquired, with sincere interest, but concealing, he hoped, his horror, fear and excitement.

"We always decide beforehand the number of our sacrificial bodies. Sometimes things do not go well, but we make our preparations as complete as we can," said the headman. "But, farewell, my brothers. We meet again to divide the riches of these merchants, as our mother Kali has allowed us to do since first our ancient society was called into being," he concluded. There was general praise of the goddess, and after it was over Lovat, with five or six others, Bengalis all, and men of low caste (except for the leader who happened to be Hussein, the headman's brother and Lovat's very good friend), set off so that they could leave the town before the gates were closed.

They knew they had plenty to do. For most of the night they would travel, and then, when day dawned, they would search for a suitable burial site.

Their choice would depend upon the place chosen by the second band for the killing. Then a runner would return to the town, meet the main party of Thugs who were travelling with their victims, and convey to them, in the secret language of the society, exactly how far off the selected spot lay. The headman then would decide whether to spend one night, or two, or more upon the road before he gave the signal for the strangling.

All this Lovat thoroughly understood, and, although he was not prepared to risk his life in an attempt to thwart the plans of their leader, he was still determined to do nothing whatever to assist the Thugs in their wickedness. The little party of grave-diggers followed at a distance of about two hundred yards behind the even smaller company of surveyors, but both parties were extremely well-armed and gave the impression, as they intended to do, of being a gang of free-lance mercenaries (of whom there were dozens travelling the roads) going north to take service under the emperor against the Marathas.

For two or three hours they travelled, mostly through forest, and then came out on to open, fertile country and the bank of a considerable stream. Here they camped for the night, built fires, sang—a monotonous, mournful chanting to English ears—and then settled down for sleep. Two men were left on guard. Two hours later the watch was changed, and during the last two hours of camp Lovat was one of the sentries. He sat there, nursing his knees, his curved sword naked beside him, brooding, filled with excitement which was half dread, and fear which was half anticipation. The Thugs, he knew, were not

permitted, by reason of the sacred oath, to shed blood in committing thuggee, and he thought of the gliding death, the sudden signal, and wished that the time for both would come and quickly go.

At dawn he and his fellow-watchmen quietly roused the camp, and off they all went again, keeping alongside the river, until the party in front called a halt. Hussein went forward to inspect the place where the Hindu merchants were going to be done to death. Apparently he considered it satisfactory, and set his own men to cast about for a suitable burial ground. If there was nowhere suitable, the surveying band would go on again, and choose another site for the deaths.

As it happened, however, a dry ditch ran between a bank of trees and the road which the Thugs were following. Hussein inspected it, and then ordered his men to dig. The small, hoe-like spades soon dug up the soft, loose ground once the pick had broken up the harder surface-soil, and after a time the diggers had made a long trench two or three feet deep.

As soon as the place for the attack had been settled upon, a thin young Hindu named Budrinath was sent back along the road by which they had travelled with the message to the headman. The two gangs who had completed the first part of the work then also travelled back along the road, and, having gained the shelter of the forest through which the main cavalcade was to pass, they hid themselves there to wait until their leader had gone by their hiding-place with the merchants.

The party had brought very little food, and Lovat, with his hearty English appetite, soon became very

hungry. Hussein, who liked him, gave him more than his share of what there was, and they drank tepid, slightly muddy water which had been drawn from the river. There was nothing to do, after the meal was over, but to wait for the other party. Hussein set sentries, and the rest of the group spent most of the time in sleep.

In the late afternoon they could hear the approach of their friends, and, shortly, along the foot-wide forest track—trade-highway in that country of narrow roads—came the headman, his followers and the merchants. The merchants had servants with them, Lovat noticed ; four sturdy fellows with lathis who looked as though they could give a lot of trouble. He began to reckon on the chances of enlisting their aid in a surprise attack on the Thugs, but could devise no way of attracting their attention and speaking with them without putting himself under suspicion. Although sturdy, they were probably stupid, he thought.

He and the rest lay hidden until the headman's party were a quarter of a mile in front. Then they took the road in single file and silently followed them through the trees. It was an eerie, throat-tightening journey, but it ended much sooner than Lovat had anticipated, for the second party of Thugs, to whom Lovat was attached, could not leave the shelter of the trees until darkness fell and hid them, so the merchants and their murderous escort moved on to the open ground and left the second party close hid at the edge of the forest.

It seemed to Lovat that they waited hour after hour, but at last it became too dark for the Thugs to be able to see one another, and Hussein touched his

arm, and he passed on the signal to the others, one man warning the next in this silent way, to be ready to follow up the quarry.

It was lighter out on the plain than in the forest, but the sun was setting, and by the time they had reached the camping site it was already dark. The headman had made his followers collect a good deal of brushwood on their way, and this was now blazing and crackling, throwing up lurid sparks and lighting the dark faces and shining in the liquid eyes of the party gathered about it. Then the Hindus separated themselves from the Moslems for the evening meal, and when all was peaceful, all suspicions lulled, the sentries ostensibly posted for the night, and the weariness of a day's travel making grateful the thought of sleep, the word of the Thugs: "Bring betel-leaf" got every Thug to his feet. Out whipped the white cloths, and so sudden was the attack that it seemed to Lovat, too horrified and too cowardly even to move, that the hateful enterprise was immediately and overwhelmingly successful. He saw the innocent travellers, guiltless of wrong, and unconscious, until it was far too late, of evil, set upon and strangled more rapidly and far more efficaciously than he, country-bred as he was, could have strangled a fowl. In what seemed no time at all the victims' last writhings were over. They lay, with protruding tongues and starting, terrible eyes, whilst the Thug leaders counted out the riches, and the grave-diggers dragged the poor corpses away from the firelight along to the edge of the ditch. Here the dead men were dumped in the long, deep grave—the head of one on the legs of another, with a sprinkling of salt and a loamy covering of earth

between each layer of the bodies ; and even then, before the topmost soil was shovelled over them, Hussein had them disinterred again, and made his men drive pointed stakes through all the dead men's entrails so that the bodies should not afterwards swell, and so betray their presence under the earth to any curious passer-by. Then the stakes were plucked out, the maltreated bodies all thrown in again, the earth was heaped as before, and this time the Thugs stamped the soil flat, and left the grave until dawn. At dawn they came again and worked over the grave to hide the fact that the earth had been disturbed. Then some got branches with which they swept the ground to remove all traces of footmarks. Lovat, under orders, helped in all this work. Then the band, with its gains, travelled on.

(3)

Lovat had supposed that he should share in the spoils, and imagined that his portion would be a small one. In this he was right on both counts, but he was surprised to learn of the very considerable wealth which the Hindu merchants had carried.

"What shall we do after this?" he enquired of Hussein, when the booty had been divided, and they were on their way again. He hoped that the Thugs, content with their haul, would be willing to return to the village.

"We have news of more travellers," the headman's brother replied. "Therefore we shall not go back to our village yet awhile. But first we make sacrifice to Kali, and are on our way to the nearest of her shrines."

Towards midday they came to a village. It was a small, unkempt sort of place, where scraggy Moham-medan fowls and a slat-ribbed Hindu cow foraged for food in the bazaar, and a holy man, repulsively diseased, squatted beside the roadway soliciting alms. The Hindu Thugs gave him money; the Moslems a very wide berth. His blessings and curses mingled nicely about the band as they went on their way. Straight through the village, along its one street, they went, until, situated on yet another tributary, they came to the shrine of Kali. The stench that met them as they drew near the holy place was proof enough that the temple was the one they sought, apart from a large statue of the goddess, seated upon one of her victims and betraying her hunger by exposing her spine through her abdomen. She was carved in stone, a realistically ferocious woman to whom the centuries had given an appearance of age possibly not intended by the sculptor. She had four hands, one of them holding a human head by the hair, and round her neck and dropping below her navel was a necklace of skulls. Another hand grasped a sword, and her girdle was of human hands and tongues. Near the statue a heap of skulls, chiefly those of goats and water-buffaloes, putrefied in a stench which turned Lovat's stomach, and near them, again, were the sacrificial weapons of the priests—great swords like broad-bladed reaping hooks, stuck in the ground in readiness for the next batch of living sacrifices brought by the worshippers of the goddess.

Lovat touched Hussein's arm.

"I can't stay here," he said.

"But you must. You are sworn to the goddess.

Do you want the Thugs to make you even as yonder beasts?" asked Hussein, greatly amused by this display of pusillanimity.

Lovat did not reply. He walked away. No one followed him. He left the temple precincts and went back into the village. A woman gave him rice and mangoes to eat. A little boy brought him a drink. They were dirty, and very poor, and their gestures were timid and humble. He offered them money. Both refused it the first time; then the woman took it. The pot-bellied little boy followed Lovat through the bazaar, a wretched affair of no proper booths or shops, but where men squatted listlessly, as if they did not hope nor expect to sell the food on the heaps beside them. Lovat thought he had rarely seen so wretched a place.

He shed his uninvited escort at the end of the village street, and walked out into the fields. Two men, on the edge of the ploughland, were arguing over the width of the trodden-down balk between their miserable small-holdings. Bullocks, yoked to a plough, stood stupidly by, twitching their nostrils against flies and swinging their tails, but betraying no other impatience. Just as Lovat appeared, one of the men, the younger, began to unyoke the bullocks. The other appeared to remonstrate, and, before the thing could be foreseen, down came the heavy yoke on his head, and he crashed down senseless.

Lovat ran up. Blood from the broken head was being seeped up by the soil. The man's lips grinned. His arms were flung wide. One leg was bent, as though he had broken it in falling.

The younger man rubbed some earth on the blood-

stained wood of the yoke, yoked the oxen again, then dug a shallow grave very quickly with a kind of mattock he had with him for breaking clods, scooped away earth as well with a dog-like scratching and scattering, put the body into the trench and tidied up again. Then, not noticing Lovat, who had slipped behind trees on the edge of the field, he called to his beasts and calmly went on ploughing.

The Thugs left the village at sundown, intending to travel all night. The sound of the temple conch accompanied them for a remarkable distance over the level land. No reference was made by anybody to the fact that Lovat had not remained at the temple, but Hussein told him that the priests of Kali had not been very well satisfied with the offerings brought to the shrine.

"At the change of the moon there will be an orgy in the jungle," Hussein continued. "The priests say there can be nothing good, nothing done worthy of the goddess, if the offerings are small. These infidel sons of bitches!" He laughed and spat.

"You are not a Thug from love of Kali, then?" Lovat said, as they walked at a good round pace on their way—for the Thugs, even unmounted, travelled particularly fast, as did the roving bands of dacoits and the soldiers of fortune.

"I am a Thug for love of the life, and for gain," the Mohammedan boy replied. "I love to feel the handkerchief twisting well, and to hear the gurgling groans of a man taken wholly by surprise, whilst his eyes start out of his head, and his tongue protrudes, and all the blood in his face turns black with the fearful pressure. Then, also, it is good to have riches ;

to know that when one is old there is plenty hidden in the courtyard, under the earth, to buy clothes and food and women."

The band covered nearly forty miles before they rested and slept—a forced march which nearly killed Lovat, but which the Thugs appeared to regard as a normal journey. He was too weary to sleep when at last, in the hot, bright glare of the full and brilliant midday, they found shelter under trees near a river, and all lay down in the shade.

His aim was to leave the Thugs, but he could see no safe way to accomplish it. Whilst he was with them, even if he never lifted his hand against one of their victims, he knew that he would be a participator in their gains, a blood-brother in their wickedness. Too cowardly to leave them until opportunity for doing so with safety offered itself, he was yet exceedingly troubled, and lay awake, weary-limbed and aching, pondering ways and means of getting away from them without exciting pursuit. He knew that they were bound on another adventure, and he did not want to have any share in it. But, try as he would, he could think of no reasonable excuse for getting completely away from them. They would never let him go voluntarily, he was certain, for they would be sure that he would betray them, and they would think nothing of killing him if he got away and they caught him. They would not make it an easy death, either, he knew.

He went to sleep at last, but very soon, it seemed to him, he was roused, and the band set out once more, still northwards, as the sun began to decline.

(4)

It soon became apparent, from scraps of conversation which he heard as they went on their way, that the band he was with proposed to meet other Thugs on the journey northwards, and were hoping to fall in with them next day.

"We have heard," said Hussein, with whom he discussed the project as they marched, "that a rich convoy of precious stuffs and jewels is being transported to Delhi. If we can get our hands on it, we shall be rich men for life. These other Thugs are mounted men. Their leader is a brave man, a Rajput well known in his own country, and certainly not suspected of being an adherent of ours. If he can introduce us into the company of those who are taking the treasure—it is well known that the Emperor is raising forced loans, for the treasury up there is nearly empty—we ought to make a very rich haul without trouble. The Rajput needs more men than are with him at present. One of their runners came into our camp last night with the sacred password, and with news."

Lovat had no particular reason for wishing to safeguard the property of Aurangzeb. The Company had not found the Mogul Emperor too good a friend in Bengal. He disliked, however (and more greatly the longer he thought of it), the thought of sacrificing more lives to the goddess Kali ; for, whatever the true beliefs of the Mohammedan Thugs may have been, their Hindu comrades' fanatical assertions that the goddess required human sacrifice, and that they themselves had contracted, by means of binding and

inviolable oaths, to provide her with what she needed, were stronger even than greed of gain and desire for a share in the wealth of Kali's victims. Lovat longed for the courage to denounce their practices and warn the victims, but he was very young; he wanted to preserve his life; to get back to his home and his friends; or, at any rate, to live peaceably among Indians, and not wickedly. More than anything else he dreaded the thought of torture; not so much, he believed, from fear of the pain itself, but because he feared that it would be straining his manhood too high to bear it bravely. He thought of himself as a weakling and knew himself for a coward. He thought that if his convictions were as strong as he professed to himself that they were, they would have upheld him against the dread of danger; but they did not, and his mind was a turmoil of doubt, self-loathing and fear. He did not hear the rest of Hussein's conversation until the young Moslem, laying a hand affectionately on his sleeve, said kindly to him:

"Are you ill? Are you fevered, my brother?"

"No, I am well enough, Hussein," he answered. A desire to confide in Hussein, who was not much older than himself, took hold of him, but caution held back the words he was longing to say. Hussein relieved him by beginning to describe the place at which they were to camp. They came upon it late in the morning, made camp—for the Thugs would not lodge in strange villages if they could avoid it—and late in the afternoon were on their way again. Again they travelled all night, pushing on, hour after hour, in the most amazing way, covering mile after mile without the least sign of fatigue. Early on the

following day they met with the mounted band, commanded by the soldierly Rajput, whom they were to assist in the task of obtaining possession of the imperial treasure. Lovat, who had begun to have some glimmering of a plan by which to make his escape from the Thugs, was relieved to observe that no one marked him as being anything but an Indian. Men of all shades of colour and cast of feature were members of the Thugs, so that, with his sun-darkened skin, black hair and eyes, and high, aquiline features, he was no more noticeable than many others of the disciples of Bhowani.

Greetings were exchanged by the leaders, camp was formed, and, after a meal, the men lay in groups under trees, or sat with their backs against the trunks, chewing betel-leaf, spitting juice, talking, telling stories, boasting, lying and generally passing the time. One by one they dropped off to sleep, except for the sentries, who were fairly frequently changed.

The day grew very hot. Lovat slept part of the time, but in his dreams he saw the victims of the Thugs, their blackened faces, the eyes nearly out of their heads, all of them bearing the hideous insignia that accompany death by strangulation.

Later, Hussein, who had been sleeping beside him, said :

“You cried out many times in your sleep, and once you cried upon the goddess. It hurts me, my brother, that you have not yet had the opportunity to offer her your best service. This digging of graves for the dead is well enough, but there are rough, crude fellows for that, dull-witted and slow, who

would never learn quickness and skill with the sacred handkerchief. You were not meant for any such menial work. Come with me through the trees, away from the others—for I would not have these fellows find out that you do not know how to get your man, and are quite untried in the work—and I will teach you how to perform a Thug's true business, strangling."

Lovat could not refuse. He went with him. As they walked, one behind the other, Hussein first, among the trees, a wild plan, but instantly rejected, ran in Lovat's mind. He would leap on Hussein from the back, force him down, bind and gag him, then make his own escape before the two of them were missed.

The young Moslem was quick, though, and lithe. His slim shoulders and girlish waist were deceptive. Even taken entirely by surprise, he might prove too much for Lovat, who was stiff from the endless marches, and then, if the Thugs discovered that their ranks had harboured a traitor, his death by torture was certain.

On the other hand, even supposing that he succeeded, he could not leave Hussein bound and gagged, a prey to white ants. He could not wish the young Thug a hideous death, any more than he wished it for himself, for Hussein, he felt convinced, had saved his life by persuading the others to elect him one of the band.

His thoughts were scattered; Hussein halted, swung round—that quick, fluid movement he had, as supple and swift as a dancer's—and said, as he unwound the handkerchief from his belt:

"This place will be good. Now, see, it is done like this."

They spent half an hour over the strangling until Lovat was quite proficient ; then they returned to the camp still huddled with sleeping men.

Chapter Nine



THE THUGS WERE TO FOLLOW THEIR USUAL PLAN OF getting into touch with their victims and making friends with them. The whole of their art was in surprising those whom they attacked, and of doing so when it was too late for any successful resistance to be made.

When they broke camp, therefore, the leaders, who consisted of the headman, Hussein, and (unexpectedly to Lovat) himself, of the one band, and the Rajput and three Brahmins, of the other, were horsed and rode forward. They set out well ahead of the rest of the Thug forces.

Lovat, riding with Hussein when the width of the track would allow it, and behind him when it did not, again thought out plans for escape, but none seemed flawless, so on he went with the others until they came to the outskirts of a town. It was walled, like some of the villages, and outside the walls lived wretchedly the untouchables and the outcastes of the place. The Brahmins avoided them carefully, but Hussein, carelessly generous, like the soldier which (Lovat decided) nature had intended him to be, tossed them small pieces of money, sat his horse like a Persian prince, half-smiled in his handsome, curly beard, and helped, as much as anyone of the company, to convey the impression that their party were mercenaries following the course of the fighting.

A Mohammedan guest-house gave shelter to the headman and Hussein; Lovat went with them. The Rajput found a fellow-countryman with whom he was invited to lodge, and the Brahmins took the usual Hindu house-room of an empty shop in the bazaar. Their lodging cost them nothing, nobody charged them rent, and they were fed with great reverence by such castes as were allowed to give Brahmins food.

Of any schemes which his companions had for getting in touch with the Emperor's treasure-guards, Lovat was in ignorance, but he was not surprised next day to learn that one of the guards was himself an old Thug, and that, although he had given up active practice of his faith, he was still a devotee, and had arranged with the Thugs to introduce them to his fellow-guards as friends in whom they could have confidence.

Next morning this was accomplished, and Lovat was enabled to see again the uncanny knack which the Thug leaders seemed to possess of gaining the affection and esteem of people whom later they were going to destroy. He spoke about it to Hussein, who replied :

"It is by the favour of the goddess Bhowani herself that we are so gifted. She lulls asleep all suspicion in the minds of those whom she has marked down for the sacrifice. They never suspect us until it is too late. After this little adventure we are bound to return to our village, there to remain until talk of the deaths and the robberies has worn itself out. The others whom we left behind us are even now prospecting for a good place for the strangling and

a secret place for the burials. As for you, brother, I hope good fortune attends you. Where is your sacred cloth?"

Lovat took it out.

"To-night, or perhaps to-morrow night, or perhaps a night some days hence, this cloth will no more be a shame to you, brother English. It will have claimed its man. Take care of it. See that you do not lose it, for it is holy," Hussein said gravely.

Lovat, revolted by these unnatural sentiments in a man for whom he felt a great deal of affection, did not reply, but put away the handkerchief carefully, as he had been told. The guards were three in number, but were accompanied by a rabble of soldiery—thirty or forty men, undisciplined, under-paid, under-fed and treacherous-looking wretches—spared from the Emperor's Maratha campaigns because they were cowardly in battle. It was thought by the palace officials, Lovat supposed, that their numbers alone would sufficiently safe-conduct the treasure, and that they would not be attacked on the journey.

Lovat surveyed these miserable sweepings of Aurangzeb's army with considerable curiosity. He had heard much, down at the English settlement, of the Emperor's losses and poverty; of the depredations of the Marathas and the sharp-practice methods of the Company. The men were thin and ill-clad. They had no sort of uniform, but wore dirty-white dhotis, baggy breeches, loincloths or long skirts, with any sort of shawl, coat, tunic or short jacket which they could muster. Some of them looked ill and all of them looked unhappy. Most of them were Hindus of the meeker sort, and accepted, without obvious

resentment, the sharp slaps and the hard kicks of their superiors who were all Mohammedans.

Lovat fell into talk with one of these leaders.

"I wonder you trust such men. Are you not afraid that they will fall upon you in some lonely place and steal the treasure for themselves?" he asked, emphasising the words deliberately in order to awaken the other's suspicions if he could, without giving an open warning.

"Treasure?" said the Mohammedan. "Who talks of treasure? This is cotton merchandise that we carry."

"Cotton from Bengal?" said Lovat. He nodded, fixing his eyes on those of the Emperor's servant. The man said:

"Meet me at the west gate after moonrise. There is something here that merits consideration."

Lovat nodded again, and talked of the wars and the weather, and discussed the kind of gossip that is heard in every bazaar. Hussein said to him later:

"What said our good friend the Khan?"

"He admitted that they were carrying treasure," said Lovat.

"Good. We knew it, but it is well to be reassured. Did he say anything about its value?"

"Nothing. I did not ask. I feared it would seem suspicious."

"Good again. Truly, Bhowani makes you cunning, as she does all her best disciples. I saw that the Khan took a fancy to you. You look like a Persian, and his family, on his mother's side, are Persians."

Lovat laughed, and the two young men spent the evening in roaming the bazaar. Lovat was keyed

up for his meeting with the Khan, and half-regretful that he had given him the hint, but Hussein, full of spirits, led him away to stand beneath a certain window of which he had been told. He was not disappointed. The beautifully carved teak house rewarded them with the glimpse of a lovely arm thrust languidly through the lattice. A flower fell at Hussein's feet. It was a signal not to be misunderstood in any part of the world. A leg-up from Lovat, and he was climbing the carved wooden balcony. Lovat watched his progress. A hastily opened casement quickly engulfed him. By the time it opened again—for Hussein lost no time in explaining that he had a handsome friend who waited, languishing, below—Lovat had picked up his feet and was out of sight and running rapidly towards the west gate of the town. The moon rose. He waited, panting a little, for the appearance of the Khan who had made the tryst. Minute after minute went by, however, and nobody came that way. A prowling pariah dog sniffed at his soft-leather boots, and the yells of somebody suffering a beating came from one of the houses within the gate, but of the Khan, or of any of his people, there was still no sign. Lovat was not altruistic. He would have warned the Khan if the Khan had kept to the arrangement, but since (for reasons which, perhaps, were not his fault) he had failed to appear at moonrise, there was nothing which Lovat proposed to do except to secure his own safety. The gate, fortunately for him, was no gate but only a low mud archway which gave entrance to the town. There had been a barrier at some time, Lovat supposed, but it had been broken down in the wars, and had not

been re-established. He slipped away from the city, drew a deep breath, and again began to run.

When he gained the cover offered by a grove of trees towards which he had deliberately directed his way, he pulled off his handsome, martial, Moslem garments and his boots, and, swift and cunning at such work because of his association with the Thugs, he dug a hole in the soft earth and buried the clothing, smoothing the top-soil carefully, and pulling a branch from the tree to drag behind him as he emerged from the grove. This obliterated his footprints.

He was now entirely naked, but a naked man was a common enough sight about that countryside, where most of the holy men were naked or wore only a loincloth. He was, however, worried about his bare feet. Like most Europeans, he felt at a serious disadvantage barefoot. He felt he needed boots, if only so that his heart could sink into them when he was afraid. He also needed cow-dung to make ash for smearing his body before he could pass as a holy man. His naked cleanliness would be suspect in any Hindu village.

The country in which he found himself was strange to him. The Thugs had covered very many leagues in their adventures, and he was miles farther north than he had ever been before. To steal cowdung from a Mohammedan cattle-shed would result in nothing worse than a kicking if he were caught; but to steal it from Hindus, to whom it is sacred, would mean, most likely, death, and it was not at all easy to distinguish one kind of dwelling from the other in a strange village in the dark. He pondered, walking along.

Another thing which exercised his mind was that he did not know how soon the Thug pursuit of him would commence, or whether, as they had such gain in view, they would trouble to pursue him at all until they had killed the Emperor's people and obtained possession of the treasure. On the other hand, their organisation, he knew, was extraordinarily wide-spread ; their people, literally, were everywhere. It was possible that some other band might be commissioned by the headman to hunt him down. He shivered, partly from the chill night wind but largely from fear, and, the road being nothing but an earthy track, fairly firm but not unyielding, and easy enough to the feet, he ran again until he was tired.

He did not know in what direction he could be travelling. Even if he came upon a river he would not know for certain that it was the Hooghly. By the cultivated fields on either side of the narrow road he was on, he thought that very soon he might come to a village. If he did, he resolved to lie up. It was well, he thought, if the Thugs were going to pursue him, to allow the pursuit to overrun his hiding-place. He had little hope that his erstwhile companions would overlook for long the buried clothes. What one Thug could bury, another Thug, he felt quite certain, could soon find. They would know, after once they had found the clothes, that they were looking for a man disguised. He glanced down at himself in the moonlight, and silently laughed. He wondered what his father and mother would say—what the English at the settlement would say—could they see their son, their compatriot. But the cow-dung was essential, and here—he entered it suddenly where thin little

palm trees grew—was the village where the cow-dung must be obtained ; that was to say, stolen.

He prowled, hoping very anxiously not to awaken dogs. No dogs howled, but suddenly an arm, whose dull bangles gleamed sombrely in the moonlight, was thrust out of one of the doorways, whose sills were raised higher, by perhaps a couple of feet, than the level of the road, and a voice said softly in Hindi :

"Peace, fool. Come quietly. Do you want the whole village to wake up ?"

Lovat, thinking quickly, ducked in under the archway, caught the woman to him and clapped a firm hand unnecessarily hard against her mouth. He whispered :

"Be silent, tender and beautiful one. The gods have sent you a better, a younger lover, than he whom you expect." He took his hand from her mouth, and wound his fingers about her thin little neck. "Speak, summer star ; speak, blossom on the water," he added, in the same, very nearly inaudible, whisper. A thin hand, soft—no village woman's hand—came up to his head and fondled it. She laughed very softly and excitedly.

"Who are you ?" she said.

"Krishna," Lovat replied. She gurgled with amusement.

"Come, then, playmate of shepherds, lover of milkmaids," she said. "My husband went off this morning. The servants are all asleep at the other side of the courtyard. I am tired of my other lovers. My husband is often away. I should have stayed in Puri. It was interesting there, with the pilgrims."

It was pitch-black inside the little room. She held

his wrist and guided him through to a door which opened on to a courtyard. A bed was laid out in the open. It was a very small courtyard, surrounded by the mud walls of the house. In one corner was a heap of fodder. He pointed to it.

"Do you keep cattle?" he asked.

"Cattle and swine," she answered, turning her handsome face so that the moonlight showed him her beauty, and laughing as she noticed his look of interest and surprise.

"Swine?" he said. She nodded, and signed to him to lie down. He was glad to rest. She flung some bed-coverings over him, and then knelt down and said :

"Do not sleep, my love, until I return. I must see whether *he* has come, and whether the servants are awake."

Lovat doubted whether he could obey her. He tried to keep his eyes open, but after about five minutes he could not resist the temptation to let them close. It was fatal to do so. He slept.

His dreams were anxious and confused, but he slept on, heavy with weariness, and when he awoke it was morning. There was no sign of the woman. He sat up, casting off the bedcoverings which were of silk. It was then that he made a discovery which, for a moment, deprived him of all power of thought. His body was smeared with great brown patches of blood.

Catching up the topmost covering from the bed, he wrapped it about himself to hide the terrifying marks, and straightway went into the house. He walked quietly, for nobody was stirring—a strange

thing, and one which, apart from his startling discovery of the bloodstains upon his person, would have told him that something out of the ordinary was afoot. Later, when trouble came, the servants would swear that they had been asleep, and nobody could disprove it. He had had experience of this manoeuvre at the settlement.

He made for the room into which he had entered from the street. There was no need to go any farther. Two beds were in the room. One was bare, even of coverings. On the other lay a horribly battered man. His head was half hacked from his neck, his face had been deliberately disfigured, and his body was a mass of minor injuries. Lovat surveyed him, conscious all the time that he himself was being watched. He did not know what to do, and felt too sick with dismay to be able to reason. His instinct was towards flight, as was only natural, but he stood there, looking at the corpse—it was of an elderly man—the woman's husband, he supposed—she had killed him herself, most likely, and had availed herself of the opportunity when Lovat presented himself as an obvious scapegoat.

After a minute or two he took a grip of himself, and persuaded his numbed intelligence to grapple with the circumstances in which he found himself. Outside the door there would certainly be servants posted—or, if not servants, watchdogs. There was no escape by walking into the street. Even if nobody stopped him, the woman, or whoever had smeared his breast and upper arms with the blood, would be sure to know what he looked like. There was little reason to hope that the business had been done

between the set of the moon and the dawn. Besides, the treacherous moonlight itself, having shown him the hand and arm stretched forth from the doorway, had as certainly betrayed his features to the woman when she first took him into the courtyard to give him a bed.

He wondered what had happened to the lover. She had been expecting somebody; that was clear. Knowing that his only hope was to remain apparently unconcerned as long as ever he could, he turned, and, walking into the courtyard again, went over to the well. Dipping the end of the bedcovering into the water, he methodically washed the dried blood from his arms and his chest. Then he began to explore the rest of the house. He had still seen nobody, and he was still aware that at least one person could see him. He could feel eyes following his movements, an eerie, uncomfortable sensation, but one to which poor, dead Lal, with his silent comings and goings, and faithful flittings and returnings, had partially accustomed his nerves.

In the second room was the lover; at least, so Lovat supposed. He, too, was dead, but less horribly. Suddenly Lovat smiled. The way was made plain. The lover—he was a young, and had been, before his death (which had badly contorted his face), a handsome, fleshy man—was wearing a long, straight sword. His dress was rich, in the Hindu style, and Lovat, mentally measuring himself against the body, decided that he could wear the lover's clothes. Still conscious that he was watched, he closed the carved door that led from the room to the courtyard, undressed the dead man and quickly assumed his garments.

Then he picked up the body in his arms, carried it into the room where the husband's body was lying, and laid it on the second bed.

Then he drew the sword, went into the courtyard, sat on the bed, and waited. What to do next he was not clear. It depended upon the woman. He glanced about the courtyard. To be taken by surprise was the only thing that he feared. He did not know how many servants a house of the kind might possess, but he knew that they would not be likely to betray exceptional courage. He thought he could manage a dozen, unless they were afraid of their mistress.

He wondered why the lover had been killed. Over-elaboration, he supposed. The wife would not have it thought that she herself had killed her husband. Two scapegoats, to the Indian mind, which he knew was subtle but illogical, would seem to be preferable to one. His business, as he saw it, was to make the two deaths cancel each other out. The whole village knew—it *must* know—that the woman was visited by a lover. What more natural than that the plans should miscarry, the husband discover the intrigue, the men fight, and, in fighting, mortally wound one another? The trifling fact of the mutilation of the husband's body after death would be disregarded by any right-minded village court of justice, Lovat hoped and believed.

It would be better, he felt, if he could manage not to be on the premises when the first enquiries were made. He looked at the fodder, heaped in an untidy stack in the angle where two walls met, went over to it, and tested its resistance. Then he plunged on to it and ran up. The roof of the house was flat.

He climbed on to it, and, reclining, surveyed the scene. There were one or two villagers going off to the fields, a woman smoothing the threshold of her house, another bringing in strewings for the floors. Farther off was a man with a donkey, and in the opposite direction he could see the village temple. The sound of its morning call, the temple conch, came only faintly to him, for the wind was the opposite way.

It was a cloudless and beautiful morning. From his perch he looked anxiously for the silver gleam of a river. On any river, in any boat, he could cover his tracks, he thought, from the Thugs and the woman, too. It was evident either that the village knew nothing, so far, about the killings, or that, if it did, it was going to mind its own business and refrain from interference. The policy of non-interference was carried to the point of vice, he knew, among Indians. They would perjure or even kill themselves to preserve it.

He considered the possibility of wriggling to the other side of the roof and dropping into the street. It would be easy enough for an active and desperate man. He crawled across the ten-foot space and looked down. Below him stood four Indians armed with lathis. He crawled back again, and saw the woman coming across the courtyard. She said :

"Come down. I want to talk to you." Behind her were four more men. He laughed, and waved the sword.

"Come down," she said again. "Yes, even if you kill me afterwards, I must have speech with you."

So he descended by way of the fodder and she signalled the servants to go. He said :

"We have need of one another. Who knows that your husband is dead? Do not ask how I know that it is your husband. Who knows who stabbed your lover? Do not ask me to prove that I know which man was your lover, but, for evidence that I do know, these are his clothes I have on."

She laughed again, showing bright red tongue and teeth, both stained with betel, and caught her sari about her to show the curves of her body. Her feet were bare, and her anklets were all of gold. Her skin was light-coloured and unblemished and her eyes large, lustrous and beautiful.

"You can wear his clothes; you can take his place," she said. She looked at him approvingly. "You are not of my people. None of them would have acted with half your boldness."

"Allah protects the brave," replied Lovat gravely, and treated her to a long, unbroken stream of Hussein's flowery Mohammedan compliments. She giggled, very pleased, and led him into the house. She said:

"We shall both be safe, we can both be happy, until my husband's brothers come to hear that he is dead. That may be to-morrow, or it may not be for a very long, long time. I shall not send. None of my people will send. Perhaps it will be years before they know."

Lovat was less optimistic, and merely hoped for the means to escape before many days had gone by. He went with her. The last place where the Thugs would expect to find him would be in the house of a wealthy, high-caste Hindu. That was his only comfort.

Chapter Ten



(1)

IT WAS VERY SOON APPARENT THAT THE WOMAN dreaded the coming of her husband's brothers as much as Lovat did. On the third day it was obvious that the servants were preparing for a journey, and, upon Lovat's demanding of them what they did, they answered that their mistress was to travel to some temple of which they had never heard.

"She desires men-children," said one, who was grooming a horse. Lovat smiled sourly.

"I shall accompany her to the temple," he remarked. The servant who was grooming the horse stood away from the animal and nodded.

"This horse is for my lord to ride upon."

Next morning, very early, they all set out. Lovat was amazed that the woman should trust him with the horse—a sure means of escape if he proposed to leave her—but supposed that she had little choice; since she herself was compelled, for the look of the thing, to travel behind the veil, she had to have an escort of servants. She hoped, he supposed, for his companionship, and, so long as she had it and was nominally under his protection, she probably cared very little whether he passed himself off as her brother or her husband. She would scarcely expect to leave him behind in the house, at any rate, for then he

would certainly escape. He was being held as hostage for her safety, and, if necessary, as sacrifice for the husband's brothers' vengeance, he was sure. So he rode just in front of the bullock-cart in which she was travelling with two obscure female relations, and behind came seven or eight servants on foot and armed with lathis, and the steward of the household on a pony thin-legged as himself. The whole procession went in single file, for the road would permit nothing else. By the sun they were travelling south.

They had started before the time of the morning offerings, and from shrill squabbling within the cart Lovat gathered that the women were at odds upon the subject of stopping at the first shrine or temple and making sacrifice. Progress was slow. The narrow cart jolted and bumped, now on a woodland path, now on a winding track across the rose-hazed plain, now between the houses of a village.

At last they came upon open country where, solitary among fields, Lovat could see a white building. He backed his horse and, leaning from the saddle to the top of the bullock-cart curtains, said, above the feminine chatter within :

"I see a temple, fair ones, situate in the midst of cultivated land. Is it your wish that we should halt there?"

The arguments inside the conveyance broke out with greater animation than before. As time, he knew, meant nothing at all to Indians, Lovat thought that his hostess must be in very great terror to wish to press on without the usual dallyings at temples and wayside shrines. In the end, however, it appeared that she gave in, and the patient bullock driver, a

white-turbaned, white-haired, white-whiskered old fellow with filmy eyes and a long nose which he rubbed continuously on the sleeve of what had once been an elegant English skirted coat, turned his equally patient, equally moist-nosed animals towards the distant building.

Seen at close hand, it was not wholly white. Meanly executed sculpture, convincingly erotic in detail, decorated its columns and façades, and some poorish sort of tiling added colour, but not happily, to its approach. Within the sanctuary, which was open on all four sides, the temple cow shared shelter from the sun with a couple of goats and a kid, and about the building heaps of strewn flower-petals festered in puddles of water left by the recent rains. On a wooden platform covered with bird-droppings was the image—Shiva's lingam—a mass of black basalt brought from the god himself alone knew where, as the woman said to Lovat when she alighted.

The temple priest and his wife, who were accommodated also in the building, came from the nearest field, which was temple land, on which they had been working, to greet the travellers and to obtain their offerings. These, to the priest's unconcealed delight, were in money. He plastered fresh cow-dung on the ground so that the woman could worship, promised that Shiva would send her seven sons, and seemed equally unconcerned at Lovat's failure to join in the worship and his, presumably, contaminating presence. Both he and his wife walked back to the bullock-cart with the visitors, chattering with great sociability and with the eagerness of people to whom strangers are a novelty and a joy.

Lovat was sorry to leave them. After the Thugs and the murderous woman, it was delightful and salutary to come again upon the simplicity and bestial innocence which had attracted him at the first to the Indian people. It was with real regret that he turned in the saddle to take his last view of the couple, who, standing clear of the shrine, with no background but the wide fields, and, above these, the wider sky, were shading their eyes and waving the last farewell.

After another hour of slow journeying southward, the road turned almost due west, and Lovat began to look for signs of the river. They had forded two or three considerable streams, but he fixed his hopes of ultimate escape upon gaining the mighty Hooghly and a boat. The scenery was tranquil and beautiful, and the sun was unbearably hot. He had borne up well against the climate since he had been in India, but sometimes a disquieting degree of lassitude warned him that he must guard his health when he could. He proposed a halt before the sun was at its fiercest, and was told to look for a shady, secluded spot where the women also could rest and in which they might unveil.

This flouting of *pardah* customs, which had been obvious throughout his acquaintance with the lady of the house, was still surprising to him. His only acquaintance, so far, with Hindu families of rank, had been in the comparatively short time he had spent at the English settlement, where it was understood by all the Europeans that *pardah* was unescapable, inviolable and essential. He could understand its irksomeness to so spirited a lady as she whom he now escorted, but would have supposed that custom and upbringing would have inured her to its use.

The bullock-cart drew up under trees not far from a village. Whilst the servants prepared food, Lovat, who had tethered his horse, strolled off through the trees towards a sound of flutes. The tune was faint and thin, and was like the network tracery of branches seen against a blue sky. It was cool beneath the trees, and a little wind kept blowing the sound towards him, so that the flute-players were actually farther off than they seemed. At last he came to a clearing, and beyond it lay—no doubt whatever—the Hooghly, a great brown width of unhurried, silted water, and at its edge, where their heavily laden boats were moored beneath two great trees, were the flute-players, lovely and young, boys not out of their teens, and an old man with them who told beads.

Lovat went up to them, leaned against a tree-trunk (letting them see him) and listened. When the melody was finished he went up to them, gave them some money, and the old man, too, and asked them to take him as a passenger. The bargain was soon concluded. They were going as far as Chandernagore with silks, beaten brassware, embroidered cotton bedspreads, objects carved out of ivory and letters from the Emperor to the French. They were come from Buxar and Benares, had been held for some time at Murshidabad to establish their identity (as they said they were bound on imperial business as well as for purposes of trade), had encountered neither river pirates nor the Marathas, and proposed to make special sacrifice for their safe-conduct to the gods. They were Vishnu worshippers, and bore his sign upon their foreheads.

Lovat returned to his party just as the servants were

being sent out in search of him. He had proved so willing a lover, so gallant a cavalier, so capable an escort, that the women had been much concerned at his absence. He explained, with an unnecessary tactfulness which caused them to giggle with joy, that he had deemed it courteous to leave them alone for a time after their lengthy journey (during which, he managed to convey, he was aware that they had not made a single descent from the bullock-cart except at the temple), and, after he had been sent to a safe distance in accordance with caste rules, the whole party, enjoying the picnic, ate rice, mango pickle, chupatties, clarified butter and sweets.

After the meal, which finished with drinking water which had been brought in the bullock-cart stored in a jar, the servants spread cloths and all lay down to sleep. This was Lovat's opportunity. He was in no hurry. He lay for half an hour at least before he got up and strolled off. A sleepy-eyed servant watched him go, so he took the opposite direction to the one he really intended, made a half-circle round the encampment and so to the river. The old merchant and his sons, the flute-players, were ready, and were waiting for him to come aboard.

He stepped into the large, well-laden boat and lay down so that the merchandise hid him from the landward view. Very soon they were out on the flood, and a long oar, rowed over the stern of the vessel, was steering them down towards the sea.

(2)

Four days and three nights followed which Lovat never forgot. Sometimes they landed, always in the

middle of the day when danger was least likely to threaten, but for the most part they floated the merchandise south, south with the tide, the rolling brown water flowing on with the boat on its bosom, the young men talking or flauting, or lying silent and contemplative, calm-eyed or with eyes closed in sleep, while to the old man Lovat told his story.

Sometimes at night they could see on the shore the red glow of a funeral pyre. Temple bells would ring out over the water at morning and evening. Ferry-boats, in the day-time, would cross their track, bearing peasants going to market or to the fair. Once a state barge went by, curved from stem to stern like an elephant's tusk, the rowers squatting on deck to pull at the oars, the steering paddle dipping over the stern, a pavilion perched in the bows, high up out of the water, and an elephant's head with trumpeting trunk carved boldly at the prow.

Sometimes the boys put aside their flutes and sang strange, monotonous love-songs, yearning and mournful. Sometimes, under the moonlight, the jackals howled. The weird cry startled them, and the old man would mutter, a little uneasily, that it *was* jackals they heard, and not riverside ghosts or demons.

Sometimes at early morning the cranes stood long-legged in the water, and sometimes the downward swoop of a hideous, scavenging bird, or the long snout of a crocodile, would mark where some half-burnt body had been toppled from its funeral pyre into the shallow water near the bank.

Past mustard-fields and mango-forests, past islands where the wild duck nested and temples whose steps

led into the river for bathing, the boat floated on and on. The current did most of the work ; the boys were allowed to be almost as lazy as their father. Once Lovat saw red torches borne through the night by men moving fast enough to be running or on horseback, but he could hear no sounds of fighting or the wailing of women. On the following morning the boat approached its destination. Lovat persuaded the merchants to put him ashore north of the French settlement, and on the opposite bank. His plans were nebulous. He had half a mind to return to the English settlement, where the excitement caused by his actions must have had time to die down. In view of this possible return, he did not want to be landed on the wrong side of the Hooghly, which, in any case, he regarded as strange and alien ground. On the east bank he felt at home.

He paid what he had promised, and would have added more, for he had taken as much money as he wanted from the woman and she had made no protest. The old man refused it, however, and gave him, instead, an amulet, and one of the boys gave him his flute and the other a light lance of the kind the Emperor's cavalry sometimes used.

"For we have benefited by your company, and our tears are filled with the sound of your fine tales," they said, and the younger boy, before they returned to their boat, plucked a flower, and, leaning forward and laughing, pushed it behind Lovat's ear. He thought that they were a little sorry to say good-bye to him. As to Lovat himself, he watched the boat out of sight, not far from tears.

(3)

At last they were gone. The boat became small and dark, then a river-bend hid it. Lovat went on his way, following the river because he had no clear plans. Not far off was a village, but when he reached it he reached a place dead and destroyed. Not the wildest dacoits could have left the place so bare, so burnt, so denuded of, apparently, every one of its inhabitants. He poked about among wood ashes where once had been huts, found bones of people and of animals, the shell of a ruined temple to Kali—her image was not entirely destroyed, for he found it tumbled among undergrowth with the features mutilated, but part of the necklace of skulls and the ear-rings of corpses still decipherable. He found the clay image of the village god in three pieces under its tree which was also blackened by fire, and nothing living at all in the whole of the place. What was not dead or destroyed had fled or been carried away.

“Marathas,” thought Lovat, who had seen their work in other places, although never as completely as this. He spent a long time searching for wounded, knowing that the raiders, having finished their task of terrorising that part of the countryside, were probably miles away. They were horsemen from the north of the Deccan, followers of powerful leaders, not blood-thirsty men, but pitiless and unfeeling. Their plan of campaign, he knew, consisted of making unexpected sorties and raids, and then suing for tribute, which the weakening Mogul Empire was inclined to pay for the sake of being at peace.

He walked out beyond the village, and after a mile

or two found, on the other side of a wood, a new village, or, rather, an encampment made by those who had fled from the Marathas. A rude clay idol, not smaller than the broken one he had found in the ruined village, stood underneath the largest tree of a clump of three which stood like outposts of the encampment, and near-by, under a lean-to made of a piece of jute-cloth and a couple of broken branches, sat the priest. The people were scattered, some preparing food, the others, having stolen back to their trampled fields, at work doing what they could to coax the crops which the horsemen had overrun.

Lovat saluted the idol and then the priest, and announced that he was of the Kashatriya, the warrior caste, second only to the Brahmins, and a person of rank. He said that he was the only survivor, so far as he knew, of a village eight leagues off, to the north and away from the river. He waved his arm vaguely, taking care to preserve caste distance between himself and the priest, and added that he was going to his relatives at Fulta.

He stayed in the encampment that night, and left very early in the morning in order to be well on his way before the sun was high. He had travelled, he supposed, about six miles, skirting villages, which were numerous but small, and exchanging word with nobody, when he saw before him a cloud of dust as though an army was on the march. Moreover, it was coming towards him. He made up his mind that, as flight would be useless and irksome, he would make the best of things, and whether the men were Marathas or a detachment of Aurangzeb's army, he would offer them his sword and join them.

They were the Emperor's troops. He recognised them immediately by their Moslem banners, by their horses and elephants, and by their turbans, equipment and the Persian conversation which ensued between two of their leaders after he had been captured and was standing before them. He had chosen his moment well, stalking them as a hunter stalks his prey, knowing that the hour of prayer must be near at hand when the cavalcade, which proved to be about two hundred strong, an advance guard of the regular forces, who were two or three miles in the rear, would commit itself to the care of Allah in the holy name of His prophet. At the time of prayer (which came about twenty minutes after Lovat had been made prisoner) the True Believers, descending from horse and elephant, spread their mats and bowed themselves. Lovat bowed with them, and then, at the end, stood up with them and addressed himself to their leader, a bearded Moslem with hooked nose, arrogant bearing and the imposing green turban of the Mecca pilgrimage.

"You are an Englishman," said this personage, after he had concluded another conversation in Persian with his subordinate officer. "Why are you alone, and not with other English? Have you offended their laws?"

"I have killed my enemy," replied Lovat, aware that this reply would do nothing to discredit him, but would tend to have the reverse effect, in the eyes of any Mohammedan.

"Why?"

"A woman, lord."

The younger man murmured something to Lovat's inquisitor, and both men laughed. Lovat was ordered

to mount the second elephant, which was still kneeling. He did so, and found himself in company with three young men of about his own age. He saluted them and they him. The elephant, at a command from its Hindu mahout, lumbered to its feet, and, swaying above the low-growing shrubs with much the uncomfortable motion of a bucketing ship on a choppy sea, the enormous animal plodded on behind the horsemen and its fellow, (an even larger beast), and Lovat decided that he was out of the power of the Thugs and of the woman.

The march was a forced one, during which they forded streams, ate as they rode, slept in uncomfortable attitudes, perched, as it seemed, in the tree-tops, lay flat whilst they went through jungles where there might be danger of being swept off by the branches, saw the midday sun sink low, and at last, just before it set, they crossed the great Hooghly itself on a pontoon bridge, the elephants being freed to swim across. This they did, and came out on the other side squealing with amusement, but the horses, led by their riders on to the boats, stepped delicately and neighed in anguish at the sight of the water over-side.

"The rest of the forces do not cross the river," one of the young men confided to Lovat in answer to a question. "We are a skirmishing party. We are to follow up the Marathas, accursed Hindus, and report upon their movements. The big force is to be sent against them later. We are bound also for Bijapur with letters."

They rested and made camp for six or seven hours, but, before the dawn broke camp, was struck, and on they went again. As they left the river behind them

the country began to change. Waterways became fewer and villages less frequent. Very often they found no road at all—not even the tracks which had served for roads in Bengal. The ground was no longer flat. The vegetation was scrubby. Temples and wayside shrines were scattered and few. There seemed no people anywhere.

In the middle of the morning the animals were watered at a tank on the edge of a village, the men had food and drink, and the leaders took counsel together. It was apparent to Lovat that they had lost their quarry. The Maratha band they pursued had managed to get away.

The rest, for Lovat, was all too short, and on they had to go after less than twenty minutes, the troop now close and compact, the horses hanging their heads as the day grew hotter.

Lovat believed that they never did less than thirty miles a day, and they were travelling continually for nineteen days after he had met them. Three of the horses died, and the men took turns on the elephant with Lovat and his fellows in the military howdah, while the unfortunates who were displaced had to hold a stirrup and walk.

The country altered further. The sunsets became magnificent. One evening they came to a huge tank stretching like a lake at the foot of a rocky hill. Great trees almost hid the square-towered, dome-surmounted mosque upon its banks, and lower on the slope, nearer the placid water, were family tombs with twin spires, each with a dome. The ground was rough, and of a peculiar reddish colour, and the setting sun flung red on the walls of the mosque, but left the tombs,

nearer the water, untouched, blue-white, and in shadow. Over the lake were mountains, very far off, quiet, dim shapes like cloud against the red-orange of the sky. Dark trees, quiet as the evening, bordered the water over there, and the whole of the sunset colour flooded the lake as though it had been dissolved there and left to drown. The deep colour over the mountains brightened and paled in the sky, until, above the men's heads, it changed to egg-shell green and then to deep soft blue in which the first stars, yellow, lambent, mysterious, drew the eyes of the beauty-loving Moslems. They gazed, then slid from their horses and, not troubling to tether the animals, walked to the mosque for prayer. Lovat knelt where he was, and prayed for his parents and sisters.

They stayed the night at this place, and had news from the ancient keeper of the mosque of Maratha raiding-parties and the direction which they had taken.

"Beggars and infidels all," he said, in conclusion. "Even the other Hindus—God spurn them for unbelievers—know that these Marathas are low, unworthy people."

"Good foemen, though," said the senior officer, shortly, "and brave men. Cunning, too, and as clever at wriggling out of a trap themselves as of baiting one for us."

Undeterred by the thought of ants or snakes, Lovat spread his sleeping mat under a tree, and his last recollection, before he fell asleep, was of stars reflected in the water. All the men drank deeply and filled up their goatskins (carried on the backs of the elephants) very carefully when morning came. At dawn they

left, after prayer. The mountains looked much farther off, and were cold and grey.

It was two days later that they came, after dusk, to a fort, where they managed to get three horses in place of the three which had died. By evening light, which soon gave place to the dark, all Lovat could see of the fort was a great, dim hill up which the weary men were climbing, leading the horses and mounting by stone steps cut in the solid rock. At the top they were given some food and drink and allotted sleeping quarters. These were in white-washed huts within a fortified courtyard. Lovat was glad to eat and drink and sleep, but, in the morning, finding that the leaders proposed to stay in the fort until the evening, and then were going on with a guide who knew the country, to travel throughout the night, he was curious to see what kind of place he had come to.

The wall which surrounded the courtyard in which the huts were built, was not more than four feet high. The courtyard was slightly on a slope, and the wall, it was clear, was not so much a defence against Hindu enemies as a safety device for those perched up in such an eyrie; for the ground dropped away in terraces for about a hundred feet, and below these there fell a sheer, straight curtain of cliff, absolutely perpendicular, so far as he could see, and unscaleable by man, mule or monkey. The place was a natural stronghold, improved, perhaps, a little, by its defenders, but capable of withstanding an army until food and water gave out. He was full of admiration for it, and decided to see it from below, if this was allowed.

He applied to the green-turbaned officer, who readily gave permission.

"You will not often see so wondrous a citadel as this," he said, showing him where the steep, long postern stair was cut in the rock. "The password on returning is 'Allah-Akbar.' I have served in the northern snows on the mountains there; I have guarded passes from hiding-holes high up the mountains, but never have I seen so fine a place. In such a fortress man might defy the world, and find himself the captain of his destiny. Go you, and look at it well. There is nothing like it in England."

Lovat laughed.

"You don't know that," he said.

"I have heard other Englishmen say it. The English are a great people—courageous, acquisitive and stupid—God gives much to such men."

He seemed to fall into contemplation, so Lovat bowed to him and left him, and descended to the ground to look up from there at the fortress.

It was a great rock, nothing more, of which, perhaps in the time of Baber himself, the Moslems had been quick to see the glory. Opposite it, at a distance of half a mile, rose a flat tableland, also out of the plain. On the rough land between the two great outcroppings rose the minarets of a mosque, and a little road, no wider than a table, went by it, windswept of dust, towards the distant mountains.

It was time to take the road again at last. Lovat was tired of the elephant, but glad to be on the move; glad, too, of the three extra horses, for his spells of walking had been the ruin of his boots. These, whatever their purpose, had not been made, it was certain, for walking on rocky roads and through ravines.

The country was rough for night marches, but the

hardy little horses picked a track behind the guide on his light-footed pony, and the elephants' heavy plodding gave the comfortable impression that they could have walked through the rocky hills as easily as they seemed to walk round them.

When morning dawned the guide left them, and the desolate countryside, hillier now, showed nothing but harsh land heavy with dark thick dust. Above was a wide, deep sky, without the promise of rain. The only sign of humanity which they saw the whole of that day, and the day that followed, was a huge broken image of Vishnu under an archway, the whole carved out of stone. The arms of the statue were broken off at the elbows, whether by vandalism, iconoclasm or weathering it was not possible to say. The enormous, circular eye-sockets of the god looked vacantly forth upon the landscape ; his mouth was stretched in a rectangle from side to side of his face ; he had a square-cut beard and a high-crowned hat, and sat, singularly straight and slim-waisted, in one of the Yoga postures, apparently in contemplation. Three stone steps led up to his large round knees. The Moslems spat at him indifferently. Lovat remembered how that he himself had used the name of Krishna to the woman who had murdered her husband ; that he had used it to gain her good graces so that she would shelter him from the Thugs ; and that Krishna, according to the Hindus, was a manifestation of Vishnu. So with surreptitious cordiality he saluted the image as he passed ; moreover, he dropped the god some bread and a piece of turmeric and a flower he had pulled off a tree as the elephant passed beside the branches.

Chapter Eleven



SO FAR THE MOSLEM BAND HAD JOURNEYED, WITH Lovat their nominal prisoner and by now their good friend, without encountering any roving bands of the Marathas. One morning, however, when the sky was pale blue and, above the mountains of the west, pale primrose colour either with haze or cloud, they saw, rising high above the greenness to which the arid countryside had begun to give way, a fortress built on a rock.

It was not in the least like the strange Mohammedan stronghold they had lodged at during the middle part of their journey, but was built on an outcropping of yellow stone on the foothills of the Western Ghats. The rock rose high and steeply, its top slightly overhanging the lower slopes, and on top of it was a wall with a couple of towers. There were one or two trees growing up there, and the wall seemed not to enclose a courtyard but to have been built as a shelter to the defenders of the small fort. Beyond the towers the wall seemed to run with the outcropping of the rock itself out to the edge of the crag. It was a grim-looking, defiant little place, desolate, with nobody visible. Nevertheless, the Moslems gave it as wide a berth as they could, although they were obliged to travel in a water-cut ravine between the cliffs on which the fort was built and an almost similar

hill-side opposite, and even then could not be hidden.

Lovat, who, the further they journeyed from Bengal, was the more anxious to be sure that he could get back some day to his compatriots at the English settlement, took careful note of the route. The Marathas, not the powerful menace which they had been forty or even twenty years earlier, were still thorns in the flesh of the old and failing Emperor. He had been viceroy of the Deccan in the time of his father, and had fought to put down Shivaji, the great Maratha chief. Although the wars had continued throughout the main part of his long reign, he had failed to conquer the Marathas, and, even though he captured and executed Shivaji's son, the fruitless, exasperating struggle went on, wasting the Emperor's men and his resources, destroying his power and sapping his revenues.

Lovat glanced up at the hill fort again, and at that moment a boulder crashed down four feet in front of the elephant, causing all the horses to shy and the elephant to complain ; this he did by making a sort of whistling noise and waving his trunk in the air.

"Only the biggest rat is gone to hell," remarked the Moslem leader, spurring his horse on to get away from the dangerous zone of the fort.

"Will they attack us?" asked Lovat. But the Moslems were unanimous in believing that the fort had only a small garrison, and that the Maratha irregulars were out scouring the Deccan in marauding bands which would not attack an armed force out in the open unless they were certain of victory.

"For all that, I shall be glad enough to get my letters delivered," the leader added, giving a command to the detachment. The men shook their horses into a trot, and the two elephants, Lovat's in the van and the other bringing up the rear, squealed merrily, pleased to sense the excitement in the air.

The country was now exceedingly rough and broken. A mile further on it was impossible to urge the horses ; they had to be allowed to pick their way along treacherous gullies and up steep water-courses which were dry and full of stones. On both sides of the route were overhanging precipices, kept from falling, it seemed, by the spreading roots of the writhing, hill-top trees, great rocks behind which an army could have hidden, and caves and holes in the mountain-sides from which men in ambush could watch the calvacade. It was easy enough to understand why guerrilla warfare waged in such a country between the Emperor's troops and the Maratha hordes could never result in definite victory for the former, Lovat thought.

It was clear, however, that the leaders did not expect an attack. Nominally, still, the Deccan was ruled over by the Emperor. The Marathas, tire-some rebels though they still could prove themselves, were not the power they had been near the beginning of their risings. They were not more, now, than bands of desperadoes. Nevertheless, their work had been truly done. The great Moslem empire was breaking up. The English at Calcutta knew it ; the English at Bombay and at Madras knew it, and so did the French at their trading posts. The English at Surat had had hard work to beat the Marathas off from the factory

there ; the rest of the town had been sacked. The Marathas were not destined to succeed the great Moguls, but they had put an end to their greatness, and had proved that a land without communications was really ungovernable territory. "It's a long way to Delhi," was an unanswerable Maratha slogan.

"The Emperor, he is too much a Moslem," said a young man on the elephant with Lovat, as they left the fort behind them. "That is partly the trouble. He makes the infidels rebels because he taxes them for their idolatry. And our chief men, they love luxury and idleness now, when, in the times of our forefathers, they lived for the sword and for war. Even our soldiers complain that the camp life is hard, and we all know how often the pay is in arrears. These rebels live on the country, and the other Hindus help them against our armies."

"These rebels," Lovat began ; but before he could finish his remark the unexpected had happened ; the Moslem force was being attacked from both sides of a long defile. The enemy, perched on the heights on either side, was raining down stones and arrows and some bullets.

"Ride on ! Make haste ! We cannot do anything here !" said the leader, hustling forward. So the troop spurred on and gained the end of the gorge. The country beyond was more open, but very bad fighting ground for cavalry.

"Do not pursue them. Head them off if they attack ! That is all we can do. If we try to pursue them they will surround every man and cut him to bits," said the leader, mustering the troop. So, in fairly good order, with a couple of score broken heads,

but, luckily, no one dead or even seriously wounded, the Moslems rode on, away from the Maratha ambush.

It was poor sort of fun, and Lovat disliked it intensely. The night was a time of nervous tension and horror. Nobody wanted to be left on the outskirts of the camping ground, and every shadow seemed to be a foe. An uncomfortable, wakeful night for everybody was followed by an anxious morning, the blear-eyed troop mounting their horses, making sure that their weapons were loose and easy to get at, and grumbling because the food was very short. The troop was on quarter rations ; had been so for the past three days. Lovat, with his lustful English appetite, probably suffered more than anybody else. All things Indian he could learn, but not how to live contentedly on the small amount of food the others required.

They appeared, however, to have shaken off their foes, and the sight of the great mosque of Bijapur, when at last they rode through the city gates, was one of the finest they had seen. The Emperor was at Ahmadnagar, and so the leaders of the troop were given audience by one of his deputies. From this reception, Lovat, of course, was excluded. Still nominally a prisoner, he was attended all the time by two of the soldiers, but walked about the walled city, admired its mosques, its towers and its palaces, and was permitted to do as he pleased. At nights he slept on the ground with his guards in a kind of barrack square in the rear of the palace. He had made up his mind, during the long, hard journey westwards across the rising plateau, that, as soon as the chance offered, he would make his escape from the Mogul forces, with whom he was still uncertain of his fate, and, when

he was free, he resolved to make his way gradually back to the English settlement, face his trial, if necessary, tell his story of the killing, and depend upon the judge to show him mercy.

As the Emperor's representative seemed to have no interest in a solitary young Englishman who looked like a Hindu, Lovat wondered whether the Mogul officers had even mentioned his name. If he had been able to obtain audience of the viceroy he would have asked to be sent under escort to Bombay, and from there, he thought, it was possible that the English might send him by ship to Calcutta. But no audience was granted, and he saw no more of the officers who had taken him in charge until the little troop, reduced now to a hundred men, five officers and Lovat, set out again from the city. They had come away well provisioned, for the Marathas laid waste the villages and burnt crops where they thought that the Emperor's people might make use of them, and Lovat this time was made to walk at a stirrup, for both the elephants were loaded and carried no men but their mahouts. Lovat was not the only man on foot, and there was a good deal of grumbling over the commandeering of the men and the horses, and after the second day the officer in charge of the party offered Lovat his freedom if he liked to go on alone.

Lovat was tempted at first, for he knew that whereas nothing would be given willingly to the soldiers, a solitary wayfarer might be fed by the villagers. But when he looked at the dusty route, and thought of the dangers which might overtake him if he travelled alone, he made up his mind to remain with the soldiers until they had crossed the plateau.

"I will go with you," he said, abandoning his hopes, "and I will take service with the Emperor if he will have me."

At nightfall they made camp, and in the morning were about to saddle their horses when there were shots and shouts, and a volley of lead and arrows struck the camp. Every man snatched up his weapons, but the enemy, cleverly keeping out of sight, harassed the troop for more than two hours, and no man liked to mount and ride out against them. It was a well-known feature of Maratha warfare to surround and cut off stragglers, one by one, until the whole force, if it was a small one, was materially reduced in numbers. At last, however, the mercilessly peppered little company grew so restive that the leader judged it wiser to lead them out of their camp to get to quarters with the enemy if they could. Ordering the men to keep together, he led them out, leaving Lovat and one or two others to stay with the baggage and the elephants. No sooner had the sortie been effected than twenty or more Marathas rushed the camp, cut down three of the men and captured the stores. Lovat sheltered from gun-fire and stray arrows by sitting down in the lee of the larger elephant. He soon perceived that there was nothing to be done except to secure his own safety if he could. He wriggled away, weaponless and fearful, and went into hiding among the rocks, expecting every moment to be surprised in his retreat by one of the foemen. From where he was he could see a little of the battle, if battle it could be called. The Moslems were outnumbered, but were giving their attackers some trouble. It seemed likely, though, that all of them would be rounded up in

time. He could not see how to help them, and the fighting soon passed out of sight, consisting as it did of a game of hide-and-seek in which the Mogul soldiers risked their lives by choosing the wrong hiding-place, and both sides raced for all the cover there was.

Lovat appeared to have chosen his hiding-place well, for none of the enemy came near him. Down in the camp he could hear the trumpeting of the tethered elephants, but the sounds of conflict grew gradually fainter and fainter. Snug in his little hole, Lovat was able, for several hours, to keep in the shade of the rocks, so that, although the heat was intense, he could keep himself out of the sun. But in the afternoon his hiding-place was no longer in shadow, and he began to suffer terribly from the heat and from thirst. Very cautiously, moving so as not to dislodge stones, he crawled down the hill-side into a tiny glen, and from there, taking cover and listening for the slightest sound, he worked his way back to the camp, and examined the bodies of his fellow-guards to see whether there was any life, but found that all were dead.

The Marathas had come back and had commandeered the elephants. That he had expected. There had been a water-hole near the elephant lines ; he sought for it behind rocks, came upon it, and scooped up the warm brown water thankfully. He had nothing in which he could carry water away, so when he had drunk his fill he decided to wait in hiding until the evening. He reckoned that he could find his way by the stars, and that he was less than half a day's journey out of the track that he wanted. So he lay up, watching and listening, until the evening, and then, full of foreboding and with very little hope of

ever arriving at the end of his long journey across the plateau, he set out to return to Bengal by the way the Moslems had brought him.

Food he had none, and he was very hungry. Towards morning, after a wretchedly difficult climb down a rocky defile which seemed to continue for miles—the bed of a dried-up stream—he came to a village. He would not have known he was near it (for the day had not dawned) except that he heard the far-off barking of dogs. He was rendered desperate by hunger, and having found charity always in India, so far, he decided to make his presence known for the sake of obtaining some food.

He wanted to retain his boots, although they were almost in pieces, because of the roughness of the way, but he threw away his upper garments, and kept his turban and dhoti. He had allowed the soldiers to guess his nationality, but thought that he could pass as a native of the country in the eyes of simple villagers who probably had never seen an Englishman. He walked swiftly towards the sound of the dogs' barking, and presently found himself in a small and wretched hamlet. He had to wait until it woke, for he dared not startle the people by appearing before the doors of huts and waking the inmates before dawn, so he sat on the ground in the middle of the village street, whilst dogs came sniffing round him. For an hour he waited patiently for somebody to come and find him.

The first person he saw was a woman on her way to the well. When she returned with water she gave him some when he cupped his hands for it, then brought him three little cakes of ground millet. and

looked at him anxiously to find out whether he was pleased. Lovat mumbled what he hoped she would take for the blessing of a wandering Hindu mendicant holy man, and carried the food to the well where he ate it and drank again. Later he saw other villagers, black-skinned and wrinkled with the sun, ugly and of low Dravidian type. Two more of them brought him food, and he squatted under the shade of a tree and ate, and waited for the village priest to come and chase him away. He did not think that the priest would permit another holy man to live on the village alms.

He saw little of the priest, however, during the time that he was there. He stayed three days, and, far from objecting to his presence, the priest sent along a barren woman for Lovat's blessing. She stood before him, touching her breasts, while tears streamed down her cheeks.

On the second day a marriage was celebrated. All the women present wore heavy ivory bracelets from wrist to shoulder, and metal rings, mostly of brass and copper, on their legs. Their verminous hair was plaited, and was decorated with trinkets; their bodices were bead-covered strips, and their skirts, age-old and very dirty, were almost dropping from their bodies.

There were no men present at the ceremony except for the bridegroom and the priest, and the proceedings, watched by Lovat and many of the village men from the shelter of bushes, culminated in wild horse-play during which the priest, who appeared to be a particularly good-tempered man, was pinched and slapped by everybody present, and emerged minus

most of his clothing. By the calm way in which these proceedings were received by the onlookers, Lovat concluded that it was the customary ending to a marriage in that part of the country.

The men kept cattle, and engaged in very little cultivation of the land, but there seemed to be food for all, and some to spare, and the people, although not thrifty, were kind and charitable. When he had made up his mind to leave them, and told them so, they seemed regretful, and took a boy and dug a pit and buried the boy to the neck.

"Now, holy one," they said to Lovat, "we shall drive the bullocks to trample his head to find out whether your journey will be prosperous."

Lovat, who understood very little of what they said, but perceived that human sacrifice was imminent, seized a spade and vigorously dug up the boy, whom he gave back, with much pantomimic goodwill, to his parents. He was the son of a widow who had been taken as concubine by a man who had given buffaloes to her family. The gift of the buffaloes legitimised the children. The boy, however, born of her first marriage, was sufficiently holy for sacrifice.

It was with regret that he left the village. The people all smelt disgusting, especially the women, who seemed never to wash either their bodies or their clothes, but they had been particularly kind.

He stopped at a good many villages after that. It was worth the risk, for it meant that he could get food, if only a little, water from a well, sometimes a wash in a tank, and always a rest. He was badly received at one village where they took him for a Mohammedan fakir. From there he had to run for

his life, for the people were heart and soul with the Marathas ; but in all the other places where he stayed the people accepted him as a holy mendicant and a stranger, and gathered round to hear what he would say. Lovat usually recited bits of Latin which he remembered from his schooldays, varied with Sanskrit texts which he had picked up from Dabindra in the past. In return for these displays of holy learning, the villagers would always give him food, and water laced with toddy.

Once he came upon a village where the people appeared to be in a continual state of intoxication, rolling drunkenly to their work and drinking palm toddy dosed with opium. He did not discover where the opium came from, although the source of it seemed to be no secret, for everybody used it openly. He stayed there only one night. Some of the villagers he met on his journeys were nomads. They lived the roughest of camp lives, and moved on every short while to graze their cattle and goats. He got to like goat's-milk because he drank so much of it. Cow's milk he refused ; and in some of the villages he was never offered it, because he did not wear the Brahminical thread. He did not mind this, as the cow's milk was thin and poor from lack of adequate pasturage for the beasts.

As his journey continued, Lovat grew thinner than the Indians themselves, a skeleton of a man whose ribs could be counted, whose knees, elbows and shoulder-blades seemed ready to stick out through the flesh. His naturally brownish skin was burnt almost black by the sun, his feet—for he had had to discard the boots when they became too much worn to be useful—

were as hard underneath as leather. He had ceased to believe that he would ever get back to the settlement and he thought of his home in England as something out of a dream.

One day, when he was making the best of his way before the sun became too hot for further walking, he came upon a landmark. It was many miles away, and he saw it only because he had turned aside from what he thought was the track, and had climbed great rocks for a vantage-point from which to survey the countryside. It was the Moslem fort at which they had stayed on their journey out to the west. He was as rejoiced to see it as Columbus to sight the West Indies. He even tried to run down the rocks, lost his footing and fell to the bottom. He was lucky not to have broken his leg, and got up bruised and shaken. Nevertheless, as he limped along, hope, which had been sinking lower and lower each day, particularly as he knew he was having to forsake the route by which the Moslems had brought him in order to get to a village each day for food, began to mount very high.

He made up his mind to remain on the track of the fort, whatever of hunger and thirst he was going to suffer, and rest up there for a day or two, and get some food to take him along on his way. But as he drew nearer the fort, it occurred to him that the garrison might not be willing to take him in and feed him, and listen to the tale he had to tell, and then let him make the rest of his journey into freedom. They had known him, he remembered, as a prisoner, although a favoured one. However, he mounted the steps. The guard on duty challenged, and then

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recognised him ; he was taken before the commander and to him he told the story of the Maratha attack, and described what he supposed had been the fate of most of his companions. A runner was sent off with the tidings, and Lovat was given a sleeping mat and some food. Next day he asked permission to continue his journey. It was readily given for a reason which he very well understood. The Emperor was still the nominal friend of the Company, and it was not in his interests for his soldiers to starve an Englishman to death for the sake of keeping him prisoner pending instructions. On the other hand, to feed another mouth meant straining the resources of the fort, for the countryside was bare and food was scarce. So Lovat set off early in the morning, accompanied part of the way by one of the officers of the garrison. This man was sent, he presumed, to make sure that he had told the commander the truth, and really was travelling alone.

Chapter Twelve



THE MOSLEM OFFICER, WELL ARMED AND ON HORSEBACK, kept him upon the track for several hours and gave him some food when he left him. Then Lovat wandered on for another seventeen days, and during that time he did not know what it was to eat a good meal. He begged and stole, went hungry, suffered from thirst, slept in the heat of the day and travelled as far as his failing strength would let him in the very early morning and in the evening, going always eastward and following the track (which he remembered past his best hopes) by which the Moslems had come. He still had to make detours from it in order to get to villages and procure food and drink from the wells. It was a dry, unfertile countryside, but there was goat's milk to be had, and a little rice, and the people treated him kindly for the most part, although one village, hereditary cattle-stealers, stoned him away.

He made his way after that by following dry water-courses for a time, and then had the good fortune to fall in with a concourse of pilgrims on their way to the temple of Jaganath at Puri. In rags, and dirty as he was, his appearance among the pious occasioned no comment. Many of the pilgrims were begging their way; these he joined. At nights the great mass of the people lay down wherever they found themselves,

wrapped themselves in their torn and dusty garments and slept, caste by caste—for the sacred rice, the only symbol in all India which has the power to wipe out caste distinctions, had not yet been received by those who journeyed—and Lovat lay down with the meanest to save argument.

The sick and the diseased formed part of the pilgrim band, and many died on the way, for the distance was long and the effort of toiling onwards, day after weary day, was very great. Some prayed for the rains, but others, Lovat among them, dreaded the plague of snakes which, in that part, followed the first wet day.

At last they reached the flat, sandy shore of the sea, and rising above the plain they could see the temple of Jaganath, Lord of the World. The pilgrims raised a shout of joy and triumph to see the end of their long and difficult wandering. It was at this season of the year, when the land was parched and hot and the tiring waves made no more than ripples on the shore and finely ridged the edges of the sand, that the shapeless idol had to be moved in his car from the temple where he ordinarily resided to another whose situation was believed to be rather cooler. This ceremony of the moving of the idol was what the pilgrims had come for.

Twenty thousand people ministered regularly to the god, being resident in the city for that purpose. He had an army of priests and neophytes who attended him, washed and dressed him, amused him, put him to bed and got him up, cooked and cleaned for him, and who lived on the temple offerings given by the thousands of pilgrims who came to the shrine every year.

A broad road stretched before the temple, and on either side of it sat Hindu ascetics in every state of nakedness, filth, disease and self-torturing posture. They were fed by the priests, and beside each one, in addition, was a begging bowl into which the pilgrims dropped offerings as they passed.

Lovat had no desire to remain in Puri. The great spectacle of the car of Jaganath beneath whose wheels the over-devoted worshippers were often crushed in their desire to help pull along the conveyance and so achieve favour with the god, did not attract him as once he had thought that it would. He was tired out and was anxious to continue his journey northward and east, so that he could cross the river by ferry and return to the English settlement.

Within sight of the temple, however, he could not leave his fellow-travellers without incurring suspicion and obloquy, so he continued with them, past mats, mattresses, and all the flesh-mortifying paraphernalia of the hundreds of holy men who had managed to solve (certainly at some considerable sacrifice of ease and bodily comfort) the problem of existing for an incredible length of time without engaging in work.

The temple itself was enclosed behind double walls, and was not in any way a remarkable structure. The city surrounding it was the dirtiest and the most plague-ridden place he ever desired to see, and, apart from the fact that he wanted to continue his journey, he feared he would die if he did not soon get away. Persons suffering from every known disease, and from ills he had never heard of, appeared to have congregated in Puri for the festival, and sufferers from

bubonic plague lay among men and women with leprosy, elephantiasis, hookworm, malarial fever, and dreadful illnesses which he had not before encountered, even in the worst of the Bengal villages. The stench was terrible. Men groaned, vomited, died before the shrine of the god. The air was heavy and putrid. There was nothing of the fresh saltiness about it which had cheered the jaded pilgrims when they had first come in sight of the sea.

Lovat lay down with the rest, but when night descended on the city he sat up, and, moving cautiously, began to edge away. The crowds sleeping out in the streets seemed numberless. It seemed impossible to walk a step without treading on some of the pilgrims. At last, however, he found himself alone on the seashore, and he began to hasten northwards along the curving coast.

He walked all night, guided by the stars, and helped by the fresh air and the inspiring sight, to an Englishman, of the luminous, gently-moving water. He covered sixteen miles before the dawn, having rested (and dropped off to sleep) twice on the way, and almost before it was light he caught sight of his first landmark, the amazing Black Pagoda eighteen miles north of Puri, a temple dedicated by bygone people to the sun. About the ruins, which were remarkable for their simplicity of design and for the amazing and morbidly erotic detail of their decoration, was a silence profound except for the sound of the sea. Of more interest than the temple itself to the weary young man, was an ancient, shady banyan tree beneath which he could rest, and in whose shelter he slept until well past the middle of the day.

Then his journey took him still northwards, and soon the spreading swamps and the bright-green feverish-looking vegetation indicated that he was nearing the mouth of the river. Here he found a man snaring wild fowl, so, wading through bog, he stepped into his boat beside him and told him, in Bengali, that he had need of the boat to take him to the English factory. The man, who was a simple countryman, a Kondh whose family had long left the hills for the marshes, acquiesced in the sudden arrangement, and when he had snared a dozen or so birds and wrung their necks, said nothing more to Lovat, but paddled home. He seemed innocently delighted to have Lovat's company—suspiciously so, Lovat thought, for the Kondhs were aboriginals, and were shy. The man chatted away, in his almost incomprehensible dialect, during the whole of the journey.

His home proved to be a very small village consisting of not more than twenty houses, and inhabited by none but Kondh families. These people did not keep the strict caste laws of orthodox Hindus, but would eat game, which they were fond of, and also fish, of which they were able to get as much as they pleased from the numberless waterways of the marshes. They were healthy-looking people, acclimatised, through generations of living in them, to the trying conditions of the swamps, and they seemed both cheerful and friendly. They cultivated rice, and some crops Lovat could not name, and reared cattle. Their huts were small, and, like most of the houses he had seen in the district, were roughly made with mud walls and very low, small doorways. The villagers loved to decorate their hair

with flowers and fish-bone pins. Unlike the majority of true Hindus, they loved to drink to excess, and knew how to collect and ferment the sap of the sago-palm. Lovat frequently saw both men and women drunk whilst he was there.

It was evening when Lovat and his boatman entered the village, and he was somewhat surprised at his welcome. He was led to an empty hut, food and water were put for him, every effort was made to give him comfort, he was smiled upon by the kindly-seeming aborigines with suspicious goodwill and friendliness. Some of the people understood Bengali, but all preferred their own dialect. Lovat did not think he should need to acquire it, as he intended to leave them next day.

When night came he had scarcely settled down upon the rushes at the back of the hut when he was disturbed by a faint rustling. He thought at first that it was a snake, and leapt up, afraid, and reached for a stick he had seen in the entrance to the hut. The sounds were not made by a snake but by a girl. Lovat firmly and rather roughly pushed her outside.

Next morning he was pulled out of the hut by six or seven of the villagers, chief among whom was the man who had brought him in his boat, and was taken, in spite of his struggles (although they all handled him as gently as they could) along the village street, and was set down ceremoniously opposite an ugly village idol. His ferryman stepped forward, and, under the village tree, Lovat was put up for auction. A water-buffalo, a mountainous heap of grain, a string of fish, and a pair of deers' horns were exchanged, and Lovat passed into the keeping of an old Kondh

with three sons. This old man apparently ordered his sons to fasten the prisoner's hands behind his back and put his head in a bag. This, despite Lovat's protests and frenzied struggles, was accomplished, and he was led away like a captive bear to another Kondh village, two or three miles further north. The fact that this little journey brought him slightly nearer the English settlement did not do much to comfort him.

For the next month the village to which he had been brought was in a state of rejoicing. He was allowed a certain amount of liberty, but was always closely attended by four or more guards—members of the wealthy family which had bought him from the boatman. He stood, so far as he could perceive, no possible chance of escape.

One morning, when he was being conducted on his morning walk—for everything possible was done to keep him healthy—they came to a six-foot post with a crossbar at the top. The sight of this post appeared to afford his captors gratification. They conversed rapidly about it, with every appearance of excitement and mutual congratulation, and when they got him back to the hut where he lived, and to which he was always tied like a dog to its kennel, they treated him more kindly than ever. Except that there was not an instant of the day or night when he could even pretend that he was at liberty, he could not complain of his treatment. The Kondhs fed him better than they fed themselves, gave him plenty of water laced with palm-toddy, stroked and fondled him, sang their weird songs to him, and the girls came and danced the peculiar Kondh version of the peacock dance to amuse

him. Had his inclinations been towards the village girls, he could have taken them into his hut as often as ever he chose. They were more than willing, and, in fact, were urged on by the men to give him pleasure. The priest, a dirty, bent old man with bad rheumatism, came to see him, and smiled horribly and fawningly on him, and spoke at great length, incomprehensively, and went away, senilely chuckling, after having fingered Lovat's ribs and poked hard, chalky-boned fingers into the small of his back.

It was all horribly unnerving, the more so as Lovat had not the slightest idea what he had to expect. But he put on flesh, much to the priest's delight, his hair regained a lustre which it had not had for many months, and he made, very wisely and bravely, the best of his time whilst he had it, and, being in very good health again, did not allow his circumstances to worry him more than he could help, and looked all the time for some means of escape from the village.

Night after night he could hear, from the doorway of his hut, sounds of wild revelry, as of intoxicated persons, and, crawling to the full length of the plaited grass-rope, which, unbreakable as chain, was keeping him a prisoner, he thought he could see the flickering of a great fire through the trees and tall marsh-plants which hid the village from view.

The villagers began to put more and more palm-toddy into the water they gave him. The spirit made him drunken and drowsy, but the climate made him crave for water. He grew stupid, could not keep his thoughts consecutively on one thing, and, for hours at a time, lost all awareness of danger. Sometimes, waking sober and clear-headed in the very early morning,

he would make up his mind to drink less of the doped river-water, to keep his head clear, his senses alert ; at such times he knew clearly, intensely, that he was in terrible danger.

But when the day grew hot and his mouth was parched, he would fail in his resolution, and, when he had once given way, the powerful palm-spirit did the rest. He drank unrestrainedly, and lay down to sleep off the effects, dead to all feeling of danger, merely asking not to be troubled ; not to have to think, or make any decisions, or take any definite steps.

The orgies at night in the village grew wilder and wilder. Then one day the villagers came for him in the morning, and carried him off to the post with the crossbar at the top. There they gave him palm toddy, enough to stupefy him. Fortunately for Lovat, the day was not yet hot and he was not yet thirsty. He believed that the hour of his greatest danger was come. He jerked over the first vessel of the liquid, and poured the next over his head, laughing as though he were mad. The Kondhs laughed, too, and set him with his back against the post. They gave him more palm toddy, but again he upset it, laughing idiotically. The rest of the village assembled, and began to dance round him. They chanted as they danced, and when the dance was over, Lovat, who expected to be killed, was seized upon and dragged back to his hut. He gibbered realistically. Nevertheless, they fastened him securely.

Next morning the ceremony began in similar fashion. He was taken to the curious post again, sat down (of his own accord, this time, in the hope that for once they might not think it necessary to bind him)

and again he was given palm toddy. He pretended to drink it, whilst his captors anointed him all over. He got rid of the toddy by pouring it on to the ground, and held out the vessel for more. He behaved drunkenly, but suddenly gave up acting and began to wriggle and squeal, for all the villagers were crowding forward to touch his oily body. The tickling sensation caused by dozens of people pressing upon him and wiping off the oil was very nearly unbearable, but until they had wiped it all off he was subjected to the torment of continuous tickling, until he feared that he would really go mad.

Then a procession formed up. Lovat, who now began to wish that he had drunk the toddy, for he was horribly frightened and would have been happier completely intoxicated, was carried aloft by several village stalwarts, and with him was borne the post, to the top of which a bunch of peacock feathers was attached. Near where the post had been planted still stood the village idol, a crude and hideous likeness of the earth goddess, whom the Kondhs worshipped. The procession turned at the east end of the village, and the ritualists returned to the sacred ground. Lovat waited no longer. Taking his bearers by surprise, for he had been lying, as though stupefied with liquor, a dead weight on their uplifted arms, he dived for the ground, rolled over in a kind of somersault, dodged under outstretched hands, doubled, dodged and ran. It was like a nightmare. There were wild cries of amazement, and soon he could hear his pursuers plunging amid the tall thickets in their efforts to find him quickly. He knew that his own best chance was to hide up somewhere near at hand, and move

very quietly away from their noisy pursuit. The trouble would be if three or four closed in on him at one time.

But very soon—surprisingly so—all sounds of pursuit were hushed. Mystified, he crouched among swamp-reeds and listened, but his pursuers certainly seemed to have given up the chase, at any rate for the time. He concluded that the respite was only temporary. Probably, he thought, they had returned to make plans for his capture.

He did not know what to do next. He dared not make for the river because they would pursue him with their boats, and even if he stole one and made off in it he thought that there would be a good chance of their catching him, for continual drunkenness had sapped his strength and, worse, his powers of endurance, and he did not think he could keep up hours of rowing against the flow of the stream.

So he stayed where he was and rested. He was afraid of wild animals. He did not know how far away from the river the crocodiles would come in search of food, but he knew that the bank of the stream was not very far away, and he dreaded the fearful monsters as much as he dreaded the Kondhs. The night passed. He was wakeful the whole of the time, and listened in terror to every rustle of the reeds. At dawn he thought he would try his luck, and get away if he could. But a turn or two, in the direction he fancied was the right one, brought him back again into the village, within sound of terrible screams. Fascinated, he peered through the river grasses, and immediately saw a sight which turned him sick. The village seemed to have decided that their goddess

must have an offering, and Lovat was now made aware of the dreadful fate he had escaped. Tied to the post of sacrifice was a boy of about sixteen. The priest had cut a piece of flesh from his back and was burying it underneath the idol. Then, as Lovat watched, he fell upon the boy again, and, amid shouts of rejoicing which could not smother the sound of the victim's screams, he hacked lumps of flesh from the body and distributed them to the crowding, blood-maddened people. Clutching the gory gobbets, they rushed away. Queer stories that Lovat had heard, and had not believed, came back to inform him that the people had gone to their fields to bury the flesh in the ground to get good crops.

It was Lovat's chance to escape. With his pulses hammering and his body streaming with sweat, he rushed away towards the river, found two or three empty boats (for their owners were all away to make the fertility offering), climbed into one, pushed off, and rowed with more than human strength and endurance, first up the river and then across to the side on which the English settlement lay.

He abandoned the boat after rowing, with nothing but midday rests, for more than forty miles. He had passed many Bengal villages and a biggish place which he thought must be Budge-Budge. He stove in the boat with a stone before he left her.

His difficulties now were manifold. The nearer he approached to Calcutta, the less certain he became as to the nature of his reception. For nearly three years, he calculated, he had been living among the native people, not as an Englishman and a trader, but as an Indian, and, moreover, as an Indian who had,

in some part, connived at crime. He wondered what effect his story, truthfully told, would have upon the factors. He began to elaborate and alter it as he travelled on foot towards the settlement, and very soon realised that to substitute reasonably palatable untruths for quite unpalatable truth would need greater inventive powers than he possessed. He began to rehearse the truth, to see how far it could be tampered with, at least in its grosser aspects. He was aware that he had not come out very well, from an English point of view, in any of his adventures. There had been over every one of them the selfish aura of *saute qui peut*, he feared, and not the bright glow of that selfless heroism which he felt he ought to have displayed. He wondered how his father would have behaved. He thought that his father would have denounced the Thugs, though it meant his death, and he felt sure that his father would have leapt in and killed with a stroke—probably with the priest's own sacrificial knife which he would have snatched in the moment of surprise—the poor boy who was made the sacrifice to the goddess.

He kept alongside the river as much as he could, and passed a great many villages. When he was within a dozen miles of the settlement and still could not think what to do, he was amazed to see, at the entrance to a very squalid village, a black-frocked, big-hatted priest of the Catholic Church, who limped very badly as he walked. On impulse, Lovat pulled out the crucifix his mother had given him at parting. The priest stopped short, a black-chinned, keen-eyed man with very meloncholy eyes and a shrewd, decided mouth.

"My son?" he said. Lovat turned and fled, but the priest, in spite of his disability, ran and caught him, and held him in a painful grip from which, in his tired state, he could not free himself. "My son," he said. Lovat weakly allowed him to take him back to the village, or rather, to that quarter of it which was inhabited by untouchables. Among these the priest worked, these he converted, and these had built him a church, a mud hut larger than the rest, well-thatched, dimly-lighted and clean.

The priest's house stood next-door, and was like the huts of the untouchables. Lovat slept in it all the rest of the day, ate food, slept again, rested all the next day and night, and then felt completely recovered. The good food and all the care that the Kondhs had lavished on him as their sacrificial victim had counteracted the effects of the palm toddy, and he soon recovered from his terrors and the wild flight from the village.

Next day he proposed to continue his journey to the settlement, but the priest, who had asked no questions but who soon learned that Lovat was an Englishman, began to tell him about the work of the mission.

"You," he concluded, fixing on Lovat his penetrating eyes, "could help me, if you would, more than any man."

"I am not a Catholic," said Lovat. The priest waved that aside.

"You understand these people and you know their speech. That means you know their thoughts. There is deadly wickedness here—the wickedness of children who have never been taught what is good."

"That, Father, is scarcely wickedness," said Lovat. The priest waved that aside, too.

"You will stay and help me," he said. Lovat unconditionally refused. He had the trader's horror of missionaries and their often mistaken zeal. The priest waited patiently until Lovat had exhausted all his arguments, and then said quietly, with the strange, compelling authority of his Church, "Come with me and see my people to-day. You can go on your way to-morrow."

Lovat, under obligation for food, shelter and rest, consented to do this, and they went the rounds of the miserable outcaste people, more like beasts than men, who lived in their own squalid quarter apart from all the caste men of the village.

Poverty and sickness were evident, but Lovat's interest centred in a wretched little figure of Mari-Amma unconvincingly disguised as the Virgin, in the middle of an open, treeless space, where some goats and two or three children were listlessly getting through the day.

"What's that?" he said sharply, pointing. The priest smiled and shrugged.

"There is no harm in that, although it is crude and ugly. They mean well, but they are not artists."

"You fool," said Lovat, with violence. "Don't you know the smallpox goddess when you see her?"

The priest betrayed no surprise and certainly showed no fear.

"We must pray," he said abruptly, and led the way to the church. Lovat did not go in with him. He sat outside in the shadow of the building until the priest came forth.

"You understand, I must go," he said when he saw him. The priest took no notice at all of him. He carried a vessel of holy water, and brushed past Lovat as he might have brushed past a tree. Lovat stared after him, and called out suddenly :

"Tell them it's Ganges water ! That will persuade them, better than your prayers, that they are going to get well."

He watched the priest enter the first house he came to, and remembered the stench inside and the sick man moaning in the corner. He supposed that it was one of the stricken homes. There was always smallpox about, and a statue of Mari-Amma was often to be found in a village, but here the incidence of what looked like serious illness had been so high that the sight of the idol unnerved him, and convinced him that the untouchables' quarter was rife with the horrible infection.

Very soon he knew that he was right. The village was almost on the river's edge, and down by the water-side the burning ghats were everlastingly smouldering. Past them the way led through jungle, and Lovat, who fully had made up his mind to go on to Calcutta, came upon a clearing among the trees. In the middle of the clearing a high, gibbet-like structure had been erected, and from it four men were suspended by hooks through their shoulders. Slowly and sickeningly the bodies gyrated in the air. It was the voluntary sacrifice (blessed by the Brahmins and undertaken by those who felt that the wrath of the gods had fallen upon them) to Mari-Amma, a manifestation of Kali in her rôle as goddess of smallpox. Another hideous statue of Mari-Amma, made of red

wood which oozed a sap something like blood, stood at the entrance to the clearing.

The hook-swingers were men of low caste. Nearby their wives wept for their pain, or for the children who lay very ill or dying in the huts, stricken down by the plague because of the sins of their parents.

Lovat returned to the village, and in the street the priest met him. Again he was going to pass him by, but Lovat barred his way and said earnestly : "Father, save yourself whilst you can. There is nothing to be done for these people. You will get the pox yourself, and die of it."

The priest looked him over and said :

"Where are you going, my son, that I should desire to go with you ?" Then he smiled, and held out both hands. The stigmata of crucifixion formed scars in the centres of the palms.

"They crucified me. One of the untouchables risked death and took me down. The poor and the outcaste preserved and cared for me. Even if my Church would allow it, my heart would not let me leave them in their extremity," he said.

Lovat, still staring, shook his head, but went back with the priest to his house. For several weeks the epidemic continued. Luridly, night after night, the funeral pyres, lighted in the daytime, smouldered into the dark. Lovat could not get away from the priest. Five times in a week he got as far as the river and then turned back. The priest said nothing. He went among the stricken people—for, although all the village had it, the untouchables took the smallpox worst of all, being more than half-starved

and dirtier than anybody except some of the holy mendicants.

Lovat, after many days of the plague, begged the priest to rest, but it seemed as though the man was so much accustomed to working to the limit of his powers and beyond them that he could not find ease by resting. It was terrible. His face looked like dirty yellow paper, and was always covered by a dewy, unwholesome sweat. His eyes were black-ringed, and his large, pugnacious nose jutted nakedly forth like a rock above his invincible mouth.

One morning he fell dead outside his hut. Lovat ran to him and raised him up, but there was nothing that could be done. His stern face was no less stern than it had ever been. Death did not soften it, nor subdue the hardness of his habitual unyielding expression. He had not taken the smallpox ; he had fallen dead as an overworked horse will.

The people among whom he had lived and done his work carried him into his little church and laid him on the bare, hard-trodden ground before the tiny altar. Lovat, to comfort them, sprinkled holy water on his forehead and mumbled the Lord's Prayer in English, not knowing the Paternoster and not liking to have to read it. Then the poor, dirty, wretched converts carried him down to the burning ghats and built him a funeral pyre distant a hundred yards or so from the pyres of the orthodox Hindus.

"We wish," said one of them to Lovat, "to send him directly to God. Tell us what we must do."

Lovat told them to do as they pleased, so long as the body was burned. So they returned to the ways of their fathers, heaped a pile of stones for him and

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sprinkled the heap with the blood of a chicken to bring good luck to the people themselves, and, on the way to the burning ground, they scattered rice as they went, to propitiate the ghosts which were everywhere. They wanted the sacred fire to light his funeral pyre, and Lovat, surprised at himself, took up the torch they gave him, and lighted it at the lamp in Shiva's temple. Nobody interfered. The priest had fled to another village, to get away from the infection, and there seemed to be no one else with sufficient energy or conviction to stop what he was doing. He himself set fire to the pyre, the mourners howled and lamented, and Lovat walked round the funeral pyre three times, and then broke the sacred water-pot. The ritual was all most unorthodox, conforming neither to Christian nor Hindu practices, but it comforted the converts, and would not, Lovat hoped, have been altogether discountenanced by the priest.

Chapter Thirteen

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AFTER THE DEATH OF THE PRIEST THE INFECTION WAS blown away—so the people told Lovat whom they had adopted, against his will, as the priest's successor—on a wind sent from Heaven for the purpose. Fourteen days went by in which no further case was reported. Nobody else was taken with the sudden invasion of shivering, feverishness, headache and sickness by which the smallpox advertised its attack, and life in the village became normal. Lovat, torn between fear of sacrilege and fear of the primitive-minded converts to the Christian faith, unwillingly invented a special ceremony when some parents brought their eighth baby to have it baptised ; a girl who had been a temple prostitute returned to her haunts and was beaten to death by Brahmins ; a tiger carried off a couple of kids and a baby, all in one week, and the moneylender went back into business.

Then a younger priest turned up ; he had been on a mission to Chandernagore, it proved—both priests were Frenchmen, and Lovat, who had no French, had used Bengali for conversational purposes. The converts were delighted. The new priest checked a few irregularities which had already begun to crop up, took it for granted that Lovat would go to Calcutta, blessed him, and metaphorically sent him packing. Lovat, slightly taken aback by this inconsistent

behaviour on the part of the Church, shook hands warmly, spent one more night in the village, and next morning took himself off.

His way led him down to the river and past the burning ghats. A temple to Kali had steps going down to the river, and Lovat, walking on, came to where a fresh pyre had been prepared, and, with the ceremony due to the funeral rites of a Brahmin, the mourners were preparing a body for burial. The dead man was laid on the ground and prayers were said for him. Then he was lifted up and carried along to his pyre. Here money was put in his hand and his body was anointed on all its openings with an offering of clarified butter. The fat was sacred because it had been made from one of the five products of the cow. When everything was ready, and all the preliminary ceremonies were over, the chief mourner brought the torch to set light to the pyre. As he did so there was a great shout of approbation, and a girl rushed forward and flung herself on to the pyre. This was the sacred act of sati, performed by a loving wife, and to be commemorated, if it was completed and the woman burnt to death, by a sati stone, a place of pilgrimage and offering.

Lovat turned away. He had never seen the act of sati performed, and did not want to. This wife, however, inspired by the precepts of her religion, insisted upon in a high-caste family from her childhood, had not strength of mind to sustain the deed, for, with a shriek, as she felt the heat of the blazing wood, she attempted to scramble off. Immediately men with lathis leapt to the pyre and began to hold her down with the heavy sticks. Her screams were too much

for Lovat, still in mind of the boy whom the Kondhs had sacrificed. He ran up and snatched away a lathi from a villager standing by, and broke the heads of two or three zealots at the pyre. Then, burning his hands rather badly and cursing with pain, he pulled the girl off and ran with her into the river. The onlookers were too much amazed at the act of fearful sacrilege to protest, and Lovat, getting away to an excellent start, scrambled her down the steps and soon they were both in the water. Here the girl shrieked again, and fainted. Lovat thought of nothing but the crocodiles. The river deepened past wading depth. Horribly afraid, Lovat began to swim, towing the girl along. Her eyes opened, but she did not struggle. She made some unintelligible remark, and then moaned with the pain of her burns. Lovat's scorched hands were almost unbearable, too. He kept glancing shorewards to find out whether the relatives were going to pursue them by boat. No boat was launched, however, and he assumed, from his knowledge of the people, that the relatives did not want a widow on their hands. Failing her act of sati, which would have brought great credit to the family, probably they were very well pleased to be rid of her. As he swam, he rehearsed the explanation he would have to give of their burns if they were rescued.

"It was supposed," he recited to himself, kicking his way downstream in an agony of fear of being eaten, "that I was dead. My devoted wife also lay beside me on my pyre. But I was not dead, except in the impious opinion of my elder brother, who had made me unconscious on *bhang* and had persuaded all my household that I was no more. And this he did because

even the share of the land which our father left me he wanted to take for himself. Now we have escaped his vengeance, but, alas ! we dare not return. Nevertheless, he is suffering of an incurable illness from which, I pray the gods hourly, he may very soon die for his sins. In that case we shall be able to return."

A boat was being rowed across the ferry a quarter of a mile below the temple. The ferryman, stolidly ignoring Lovat's cries, took his passengers across and waited with indifference while they disembarked. Then he began to row towards the swimmers and, not without hurting them considerably, for although their burns were not serious they were extremely painful, hauled them aboard his craft.

He asked no questions, but, following in his slow mind the line of least resistance, rowed them ashore at his usual landing-place, and waited while they stepped out on to the bank. Lovat could pay him nothing, but the girl took off one of her anklets. She had put on all her jewellery for the sati. The ferryman shook his head and folded his arms.

"Take it," said Lovat. The ferryman made an inarticulate sound which they took for refusal. He was a mute. Stepping farther along in his boat, he pushed off. On the opposite bank another boatload of people was waiting to cross.

Lovat took the girl's hand, and they followed the people who had crossed the ferry. They were still on the Company's side of the river, but the people were walking south, which would take Lovat and the Indian girl away from trouble.

Rain was gathering. The sky was black, the clouds hung very low. The forest path was almost

indecipherable, and alone they would not have found it. They quickened a little to get nearer the people in front, and before the rain broke they were out in another clearing in front of a temple, and here a fair was being held. Buying and selling went on, accompanied by yelling, the droning made by itinerant musicians, the noise of children playing and of people quarrelling. Lovat watched it all with interest, but the girl was half-frightened and wholly excited. The strict *pardah* under which she had been brought up had not allowed her to enjoy the delights of a fair. She was like a child, and forgot her burns and her bedraggled condition in the overmastering interest of all that was going on.

Lovat took her up to a man who was selling clothing, but before they could trade some of her jewellery against sari for her, and dhoti and turban for him, the rain was on them and very soon everybody was as wet from the rain as they were themselves from the river. A rush was made for the shelter of trees, but Lovat decided to go to the village which must be somewhere near, and took the opposite direction.

The heavy rain nearly beat them down to the ground. They could scarcely breathe in it. It was accompanied by thunder and vivid lightning flashes, and the Indian girl moaned, not in pain this time, but for fear. Lovat helped her along as best he could. The ground underneath their feet became a bog. They sank in over their ankles. Fortunately the village was not far. A clump of bamboos, an island in the sea of darkness and rain, sheltered the most northerly houses, and then they were in the village street. A deserted hut, tumble-down and wretched,

afforded then a little corner of shelter, for some of its roof still held.

They huddled here, out of the rain, and listened to its beating and pouring, and the sucking noises it made as it ran in natural gullies away towards the river. They did not talk. Lovat was afraid that, wet as she was and with no hope of getting dry clothing or the warmth of a fire, the girl would take serious harm. After a while he took off his own clothing and squeezed the water out of it and wiped himself down with the damp bit of cotton cloth which he had been wearing round his waist. Then he moved away from the girl, but she remained as she was, hunched up in her sodden sari, as remote from him, it seemed, as though they had been miles apart instead of both sheltering like beasts, instinctively, in the first bit of cover they had found.

The rain lasted on through the night. They heard the villagers returning at sunset from the fair, and the sound of the temple bell, but the night was unusually silent. There was no sound of jackals or tiger, no humming of mosquitoes. A snake dropped down from the sagging roof and rustled away in the dark, but that was the only incident.

The morning was fine. Lovat, who had spread out his clothing, found it nearly dry. He put it out in the sun. Everybody seemed to be doing the same, but the other people, he supposed, must have something else to put on. The girl was asleep, her sari still gathered round her. As soon as his clothes were dry he put them on and went out to get her some water. He begged a brass vessel from a woman at the well, who had three. He showed her his burnt

hands, and told her that his village had been burnt out by raiding Marathas. He took her along to see the girl, whom he referred to, naturally, as his wife.

The people of the village were kind, particularly when they examined the jewellery, solid tokens of respectability in a land where money was not the only medium of exchange. They did not covet the jewellery; neither did they make then, or at any time later, any suggestion that it should be made over in payment for food and clothing, both of which were immediately forthcoming for the strangers.

"The people here are good. My name is Cleave," said Lovat, when the villagers had gone off to their fields and the women back to their homes.

"My father and husband were Brahmins. My name is Parbati," she answered. After a pause she added: "And now I must go back and shave my head, and sit in shame in the house of my mother-in-law."

"No," said Lovat, "you cannot go back yet. You must stay here, now, until your hurts are better."

He begged a little oil for their burns, and promised to work, later on, on the fields of all who had helped them. The rain came on again. It was the time for the heavy ploughing, and he knew that help would be welcome. In a day or two they were given another hut with a mended roof. It was larger and cleaner than the first, and was nearer the centre of the village.

For a week or two he wondered what he should do with Parbati after her burns were healed. They healed rapidly—her flesh was healthy—but still he said nothing to her on the subject of their parting, although he was still very anxious to get to Calcutta,

and hardly thought that he could take her with him. On the other hand, having burdened himself with the responsibility of having saved her life, he did not feel for an instant that he could abandon her and go to Calcutta alone until some provision had been made for her.

He worked on the fields of the farmers in return for food for them both, and began to look forward, each day, to his homecoming, to Parbati's shy welcome, and to eating the food she had cooked.

The most noticeable among her many characteristics, but the one which for some time caused him acute discomfort, was her extraordinary submissiveness. He had seen very little of this peculiar, and, to his mind, two-edged virtue (although it was usual among the Indian women) for among those of high caste the *purdah* rule was unbreakable. The women of lower caste worked side by side with their men and in some cases were the men's superiors. These were not always submissive. But Parbati, in her gentle acquiescence in all his moods, her immediate obedience to any and all of his wishes, was surprising and disturbing to him for months. He grew used to it later on, and disregarded it, although he always tried—it was one of his virtues, this, although he never knew it—not to take advantage of her meekness. He could never bear to be harsh with her—indeed it never seemed necessary. Once she said to him, as she sat apart and watched him enjoying the food she had prepared—she never sat and ate with him; he could not persuade her to do so, for no wife ate with her husband by Indian custom, but waited until he had finished :

"I think, my lord, that you and I are a little like Shah Jehan and the Mumtaz Begum."

"But they," Lovat answered, to tease her, "were Moslems, and therefore outcastes. Why do I have them mentioned in my presence?"

She looked distressed at once, and answered sadly :

"As my lord wishes. I thought that they had a true love for one another, and I, now, am outcaste also."

As she said it she began to weep, wailing in Indian fashion, uncontrolled in her grief. Lovat put his arms round her and hushed her into silence, and she lay against his breast. The village had known them as man and wife from the beginning, and Lovat, happier with the Indian girl in his arms than he had been since he had left England, whispered to her, not the flowery compliments of Hussein, but gentler, more sincere, more childish endearments, and put Calcutta, and all it meant, from his mind.

For the rest of that year he had never known what it was to be so happy. Sometimes he thought of Margaret under the cedar tree waiting to bid him good-bye. He could hear her voice, begging him promise to come home as soon as he could. He remembered that she had pledged herself to wait for him, and that his mother knew it, and had said she would comfort Margaret all the time that Lovat was away.

He rehearsed these memories sedulously, and tried to believe that he did not love Parbati. Then he would finish his food quickly and kiss her again, and play foolish, baby games with her fingers and toes, and both of them would laugh and cling together

again and kiss, and she would sing to him in the darkness.

He tried to persuade himself that it could not last ; that such happiness could not be permanent. Then, to contradict the impious thought, he sold the jewels which she had given him and bought land for himself in the village instead of working for other farmers for food. Sometimes he would say to her :

“ Are you happy, Parbati ? ”

She never answered that. To answer it truthfully, she said, would be very unlucky. He told himself, studying Parbati's beautiful face as she dropped her dark eyes before his gaze, and blushed (as she always did when she found his eyes meeting her own) that Indian women soon grew old and ugly, and that even the sweetest-seeming were jackals or tigers at heart. But Parbati seemed to grow more beautiful ; her serenity of itself was loveliness ; she seemed to want nothing but his love, and delighted in every task because she performed it for him.

He passed for a caste man in the village, and she always pretended she thought him such, although she knew well, and he knew, that no Hindu would ever have dreamed of rescuing her from the flames. He never knew whether she thought him Christian or Moslem. She was remarkably, fascinatingly ignorant of everything on earth except love and marriage and general household accomplishments. In all of these her skill was delightful and unailing.

Autumn, winter and spring, they all went by ; Lovat became a skilful husbandman and on the rich, fertile soil the crops did well. Splashed with mud to the waist, he did his ploughing, and the sun burnt

him almost black. His health was good, and the village was free from sickness. Everything went exceptionally well with them both, and then, later on in the summer, when no rain fell and the earth was baked hard like a cake and the river ran many feet lower than it had done since Lovat first remembered seeing it as it carried his ship between banks of oozy mud when first he had come out from England, she told him the joyful news that she was with child.

"And you must pray to your gods, and I will pray to mine that the baby is a son," she said with tremendous earnestness. Lovat laughed.

"I should welcome a daughter if she were like you," he said. Parbati shook her head.

"A daughter would be unlucky, most unlucky. Pray hard, if you please, for a son."

So they both prayed, for she kept a special corner for the household gods, and, during her pregnancy, gave the chief place to the round white stone which represented Shiva's sacred lingam, talked long and knowledgeably with the other women of the village, and arranged for the services of the ugly, dirty old midwife with her horrifying stories of ghosts and monsters. Lovat studied the midwife with interest, and listened, without comment, to some of her conversation with the villagers. One evening Parbati said :

"In our marriage service we always beg the bridegroom to fill us with a child, and then we pray that the child may be a son. That is because the father needs a son to perform his funeral rites. That is very important. But I long for a son for another reason as well."

"And what is the other reason, radiant, eager and

beautiful one? Tell me what is in your heart," he said.

She leaned forward and held him by the thighs and said, with a little gasp, for the pains were just beginning :

"The other reason is that I wish to have thee made all over again. The blessing of Indra be upon us, that the child may be a son ; may Vishnu make me ready, may Thvashti shape me a man ; as Vayu dwells in the womb of the earth, as Agni impregnates the earth and Indra the wide sky——"

Her voice died away in a moan. Then she said faintly :

"You parted my hair at the seventh month with the porcupine quill. You remember?"

"Yes, I remember," said Lovat, savage because of her pain. The midwife, who had judged the day when her presence would be called for, was squatting outside the hut on the raised, hard threshold. Hearing the moans, she got up and hobbled inside. Lovat watched her with loathing. As she bent over Parbati to give the unneeded assistance which delighted the hearts of her filthy and cruel sisterhood, Lovat clawed her back. He thrust her towards the door of the hut, pushed her outside, and barred the entrance against her. She yelled and beat upon the door, shouting abuse and threatening instant death to an infant born without her insanitary ministrations. Lovat sat down by Parbati. The labour was not a prolonged one. Later he gave the midwife the usual present for her services and topped it with a good meal. He would not allow her inside the hut, however, even to look at the baby.

Everybody rejoiced when it was known that Parbati's first child was a boy. The villagers smeared a little honey mixed with clarified butter upon the baby's tongue, and the priest came and whispered his name in his tiny ear and commended him to the gods with the hope of a hundred years of precious, untroubled life.

He was a brown-skinned, healthy baby; more like his mother than his father, although Parbati denied this. Both his parents loved him; Parbati worshipped him. Lovat teased her and said:

"We have a man-child, therefore the gods are forgotten."

When the child was a few months old the next little ceremony consisted in the shaving of his head. One black lock was left, the tuft of hair that is treasured by all Hindus.

"And what is that for?" asked Lovat. Parbati regarded the baby pensively, gave him her little finger to suck, smiled at Lovat and answered with perfect assurance:

"He keeps that lock of hair for all his life, because, by that, the gods can lift him into heaven."

(3)

It was impossible for Lovat now to return to Calcutta. Many of the factors, he knew, had taken Indian wives, but only of lower castes, and most of them were deserted when the men returned with their gains to England. He felt that he could never abandon Parbati. She and the baby boy now bound him strongly to India, and to the poverty-stricken but happy life he was leading. Before this he had been interested in

the country and curious about its people. That had been very strong, too, that unrestful, zestful feeling that he must be at one with the Indians ; that he must learn their speech and familiarise himself with their ways so that they should be, not strangers, but kinsmen to him. But it was now a more powerful conviction that held him fast—the experience, like a taste of heaven and unsoured by any previous lustfulness, of having a woman love him heart and soul, with passion and anxious service, with playfulness and tenderness. He had never known that a woman could love as Parbati seemed to love him. For love, to Parbati, was religion. It was the chief part of the devotion she owed to her familiar, lovable, legendary, human-seeming gods. It was not only Lovat she worshipped, but also Shiv ; and in the growing child she envisaged not only the beautiful consummation of marriage, but the wonderful childhood of Krishna, incarnation of Vishnu, adorable, happy, heroic, and she wanted her son to be like him. They named him Krishna, put charms on his little bracelets, pushed flowers in his straight black hair, sprinkled him with dust and with rose-petals, laughed at him, indulged him, and played with him, and the baby grew healthy and beautiful, lovable as the summer breeze, sweet-tempered as the early morning sun, laughing and happy as the tireless, endless river as it flashed back the brightness of the day.

Day after day Lovat worked, and the life seemed natural for him. The ordinary life of the village went on without interruption, and he felt himself one with the other husbandmen and welcome at the village councils. He raised a loan in order to acquire

more land, and arranged a rate of interest which the moneylender protested would ruin him. The easy-going villagers stood and laughed whilst Lovat took the man's scrawny throat between hands strengthened by farmwork, and promised to squeeze his life out if he did not make a fair bond. He was much in request, after that, as a village bruiser, and could have made some money by taking part, by arrangement, in village feuds and squabbles. There were endless wheels within wheels among the villagers. Quarrels over land boundaries and cattle trespass were always rife, but were confined, for the most part, to scowls and wordy arguments, and the invective which the Indians hated more than blows because they believed that the curses had power to do harm. These individual enmities were liable to flare up at any moment into ugly scenes of mob violence during which the village took sides and people were often killed. Two such fights occurred during Lovat's first year in the village.

Lovat wisely avoided these quarrels whenever he could. Sometimes it was impossible, but even when he had been drawn in he extricated himself as soon as he could without being suspected of cowardice. The Indians, on the whole, were cowardly themselves, but in fights would appear to go mad, losing all sense of fear. Lovat noticed that the people never charged him with encroachment, and, if his cattle strayed, they would always accept his apologies with polite and deprecating smiles, and some of them even refused to accept the compensation which he offered.

He became known as a level-headed man and was

obviously of considerable intelligence, and so gradually rose to a high place in village councils. The headman asked his advice ; women, pleased with his handsome, youthful appearance, would gossip to him by the hour about all the affairs of the neighbourhood ; the priest respected him. Parbati watched jealously the women, but gave no sign that she did so. Lovat was not attracted by them at all, except that he was interested in the folk-tales and the scandal, the general tittle-tattle and rumour, the glimpses of minds unlike the minds of his people, the childishness underlying all their basic ideas, the dark fear of ghosts and of demons, the human, unconquerable superstitions and the atavistic beliefs, the extraordinary gentleness and the equally strange ferocity of this thin-bodied, hard-working, child-bearing, husband-beaten sex.

For the women were often treated very cruelly. That was one of the things he could never understand, and the thing, of all others, to which he never became accustomed. Moreover, they did not resent it, but were meek and obedient to their husbands, however unkindly they were used. There was a classic case in the village—it had happened before he came there, and he heard it merely in the general gossip at the well—of a wife who had angered her husband. The husband threatened to kill her, so she brought him the spade he used for digging his fields, and lay down at his feet whilst he battered her head to pieces. That this was not an isolated instance Lovat was uncomfortably sure.

His, however, was not a missionary spirit. He saw no way of altering such theories as the men and women both held on the subject of their mutual relation-

ship. He looked on, not unmoved, but certainly without hope of constructive interference, at cases of what he thought was ungrateful wickedness. But a wife was no more than a bullock. She could be worked to death, and had no right of protest or of retaliation. Some there were, and almost he rejoiced to see it, who were more than the equals of their husbands ; who ruled the house, the children and the man with wrought-iron, unbreakable authority, but there were very few of these, and sometimes their husbands murdered them all the same, but a little more artfully.

There was cruelty to animals, too ; cruelty that even Lovat, brought up to consider the incidents of English farming and stock-rearing, the provision of meat for table and the butchery of the hunt as things which were justified by necessity, thought senseless, aimless and repulsive. It was a continual source of wonder to him that people so outwardly mild-mannered, timid and good-willed could be, in their secret selves, so violent, wolfish and vile. At first it all angered and disgusted him ; as he grew older, lived longer among them, understood them more intimately, it distressed, depressed and frightened him. He would look at Parbati and wonder whether beneath her gentleness and love there lurked the same devil of childish, demoniac cruelty that seemed to be instinctive in her race.

And yet they were all so attractive, hospitable and kind. The people of the village, in times of peace, were all their firm, good friends. The shy children, covered with the rich and fertile dust they played in, were charming, essentially lovable, confiding,

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timid and sweet. The chatterers at the well, the old, shambling village watchman, eternally disconsolate because he had no one to succeed him in what was an hereditary occupation, the headman, suave and kind—they were good and virtuous and friendly. If only, he thought, there were power in that hot, lush land to cast out devils, cruelty, ignorance and fear need be no more.

No such power appeared ; but, over all, full compensation to a nature like his own, was his personal domestic happiness. He felt that, having his wife and his son, there was nothing else left to wish for. He thought no longer of Calcutta. Two more children were born—both girls—and died in infancy. At the time he was grieved, as was natural, and more for Parbati's sake than for his own, since she had had the pain and discomfort of bearing them, but later on the facts of those deaths recurred to him with another, and a very unpleasant significance.

Chapter Fourteen



(1)

LOVAT WOULD NEVER GO TO THE MARKET ACROSS THE ferry. This did not involve crossing the great Hooghly, but a minor tributary which separated the village from a small, mud-walled town whose people—craftsmen of various kinds—were ready to take agricultural produce from the villages round about it. Sometimes, however, the peaceful life he was leading, broken only by village quarrels, faction fights, and feuds with neighbouring villages, grew, not irksome, but sometimes dull, especially during the rains.

The springtime was nearly as bad, although not for the same reason. During the spring a nostalgia would overcome him, and he would sit outside his hut—that hut whose floors were sedulously washed over with cowdung twice a week—play with his son, or watch him playing with the other village children—some of them of the lowest castes in the place, for a boy under seven years of age kept no caste rules, and little Krishna seemed to like his poorest playmates best—and think about England and his parents, and wonder, sorrowfully, how often his mother had written since he had left the settlement, and who had replied to her, and how. He wondered whether she thought of him as a murderer, but reflected that none of the factors would have been so cruel as to tell

her that about her son. Probably she thought of him as the victim of circumstances. He longed to see her again.

He had seated himself outside his hut, as he usually did in the middle-day when he was not at work in the fields, and was thinking these long, hard thoughts, when Dasi, a neighbour, saluted him as he passed, and asked whether he had heard the news that the ferryman had brought.

"I have heard no news. Is it good news?" Lovat enquired. Dasi smiled and answered, in the childish high voice to which Lovat never became entirely accustomed :

"Who can say? I think bad news, perhaps. But maybe it is good news. Time alone can show us. The Emperor in the north, they say, is dead."

Rumour turned to certainty within a week and a half. Lovat broke his rule, and crossed the ferry to go to the market-town and hear for himself what was being passed round among the people. As a result of listening to all the gossip, he suffered from a fit of extreme restlessness, worse than any he had experienced. He could see that the death of the old Emperor, who had left no definite successor, might be a great opportunity for the Company to push their interests, and obtain, by promises of support to one or other of the candidates for the throne, greater concessions than, so far, they had been given. He felt an urge to get back, to rejoin his people, to take part with them in future attempts to establish themselves more firmly. He knew why he had not crossed the ferry before. He had dreaded this shattering of his peace, and had known that some day it must come.

There were several Europeans in the bazaar. He watched them enviously as they passed from stall to stall, sampling and testing the goods. He drew nearer, to hear them speak to one another, and when he heard them conversing together in English, he could hardly bear to be silent. Their conversation, apart from the fact that they were English, intrigued and puzzled him, for they referred continually to something which they called the Old Company, and one said to the other, as they planted large English legs across the width of the road :

“There is no doubt that the death of the Emperor would have been a great opportunity for the Old Company, but now that the Emperor’s successor will have us, as well, to bargain with, no complete monopoly can be granted.”

“A pity, all the same, that we beggared ourselves with that Government loan,” said the other. For how long, Lovat wondered, had a new East India Company been in existence? Who had subscribed to it? How far had it affected the affairs of the Company whose servant he had been? He had nothing much to say to Parbati for several days after his return. She fed him, prayed for him, kept the little boy quiet—a lovely little boy, calm-eyed, moon-faced and brave—and waited patiently for Lovat’s mood to pass, and he succeeded by his usual cheerful kindness. Patiently, uncomplainingly, she waited, and after a little while she felt that all was well again, for Lovat caressed her, played with her and the baby, went off to work whistling and happy. But as the bits of news came drifting in, he grew restless again, and she said :

"You should undertake a pilgrimage, my husband ; or it might be good to go to a teacher and sit at his feet and meditate. We should miss you ; we should fast, my dear lord, until you returned to the house ; but it might be good ; it is dull for you here with us, and we are grateful to you that you have stayed so long."

At that Lovat felt remorseful. He believed that he ought to be utterly content and happy. He kissed her and then said, watching her at her tasks :

"Do you ever wish to return to your own people ? Do you wish that you had a rich husband, and observed *pardah*, and had servants to wait on you ?"

She smiled and shook her head. She never told him her thoughts, but always agreed with his. She did so now, and he knew it."

"I wish to have nobody but you."

"And our son ?"

"And our son. I am thankful that we have no daughters. Their lives are not good. They would not make good marriages because we are not rich."

"And are you glad, still, that I did not let you die ?"

To that she returned an evasive answer. He had robbed her of her chance of becoming a household god. Her sati stone would have been a place of pilgrimage. He had robbed her of her chance—for her first husband had been a devout man—of enjoying the society of a Brahmin in the existence beyond the grave. She had forgotten her screams and struggles, and remembered only that she was outcaste and Lovat had made her so. She loved him none the less because of this, but in the night she thought of hell, its

scorchings and freezings, its thorns, wild beasts and swords, and was horribly, despairingly afraid. She would burrow against her husband, and Lovat, thinking she had had a bad dream, would hug her close to reassure her, and she was reassured until the next time. He never knew what she suffered, because she never told him—and with all his knowledge of Indians he still could not fathom the dark and murky depths of their superstitions, or understand and appreciate the terror that they lived in because of them.

Several weeks went by, and Lovat did not cross the ferry again, although it was hard to stay at home. He knew, however, that once he took interest again in the doings and affairs of his people, his peace and contentment would be gone. He was still a very young man—even Indians, who matured much more quickly than the English, thought him a young man still—and he had all a young man's natural restlessness, even although he was happily married and had his son to think about and plan for.

He talked to the baby, sometimes, in English, which he wanted him to learn. He had visions of a settlement populated by Anglo-Indians, a real fusing of the two peoples—and he looked upon Krishna as a possible pioneer of such an Utopian scheme. To accomplish it, however, the child, when he grew a little older, must go to the settlement, and it must become as familiar to him as the village was, and, to bring that about, his father must return, some time, to the settlement with him.

Parbati watched and listened, but said nothing when he talked to the baby in English. She would never

disapprove, Lovat knew, of anything that he did—such an emotion as disapproval was not in the nature of an Indian woman of her age—it might come when she grew to be old—but he thought that her attitude was suspicious. He said to her :

“It is good for him to learn. Later on it will be to his advantage. Our son was not born to plough and to wade in water ; to listen for the rain on the roof, or to grow thin like the leafless branches because he has walked on wet ground.”

He referred to the emaciating attacks of the hook-worm, the curse of a barefoot population. Parbati sighed and agreed.

One day, soon after this conversation, some Englishmen came ashore at the village landing-place. The headman, the old watchman, the villager who kept tally of the revenues, Lovat, Dasi and other villagers of importance, went to meet them. The Englishmen spoke in rather halting Hindi, and no one but Lovat could understand what they said. He tried them with Bengali, but this proved of no help whatever, so he acted as interpreter and go-between, learnt that they were agents of the New Company, that the New Company had been in existence for about seven years, and that it was (so its agents asserted) far more powerful in the land than the Old Company had ever been, and that it wanted to trade with the villages which were not directly in the hands of the Old Company.

Terms were offered, rejected, modified ; the protagonists sat down in the shade, and both sides, the Englishmen philosophically, the Indians with keen pleasure, settled down to a long period of haggling.

After an hour or two of, to one side an exasperating, to the other side an interesting and necessary argument, a basis was reached which both sides accepted with sufficient mental reservations to secure, each thought, that the other would have no advantage. Terms were discussed, the amount of produce computed, and even such details as portorage, storage and wastage brought under discussion, considered, and allowed for ; then Lovat led one of the Englishmen (who was going to remain in the village as overseer of the arrangements) to an empty hut, installed him, and, in conversation, elicited all the facts that he could about the death of the Emperor Aurangzeb, the name and character of his possible successor, the relationship between the Old Company and the New, the further tidings that a new queen, Anne, had been on the English throne for the past five years, and many other interesting things. Although they talked in English, he did not reveal to the man that he himself was English, but said that he was an Eurasian, of mixed Indian and Portuguese blood. He did not wish to commit himself too far. Nevertheless, he liked the Englishman, who was not much older than he was, and during the days that followed they met regularly and talked for hours at a time, and Lovat saw little of his home except at night. He even ate with the man.

Opinions in the village varied on the subject of this friendship. There were some who said that Lovat would be able to get better terms by showing courtesy to the man and talking to him. These were in the majority, for the advent of the Europeans was a new thing in that village, and the villagers, simple

and shy, were in awe of them, and were proud that Lovat should be able to meet them on what seemed to be equal terms.

Others, however, thought differently and distrusted Lovat, and also the language, unknown to them, that he spoke. They did not believe that he had anybody's interests at heart but his own, and were thoroughly suspicious of the relationship with the stranger.

The Englishman's name was Masters, and the hut he had been given was an old one, re-thatched for him on the first day of his stay. It had been built on the other side of a fordable creek just outside the village proper, and was not in the untouchables' part of the village, but stood by itself because it had once belonged to a Mohammedan shoemaker. When he died the Hindus, of course, could find no use for his house, to them a polluted habitation. It had been decided, in conference, however, that it would make a suitable residence for the equally outcaste Englishman, and a couple of untouchables had been given the task of making it fit to live in.

One day, before the dawn, Lovat was awakened in his own hut by hearing Parbati moving about the room. He called to her and asked her what she was doing. She replied, in her usual gentle tones :

"I am going out to cut grass."

"But you are not of the caste of the grass-cutters, and neither are you a hill woman," Lovat replied. "Lie down again. It is scarcely morning yet." He thought she had been dreaming again and must be half asleep. Obediently she lay down and they rose as usual, very early, Lovat to go out to his fields,

Parbati and the child to remain in the village. When it was time for the midday rest and refreshment, Parbati came out to him again as usual, the little boy walking, grave and upright, beside her, and all three sat in the shade, Lovat and his son together and Parbati waiting upon them. After the meal was finished Lovat said :

“Keep the child here in the shade, and when you have had your food, rest in the shade, you also. I go to talk with my friend across the stream.”

He walked to the edge of the little river—an old bit of canal, he thought—about three-quarters of a mile from his land. He waded across and sat at a suitable distance from the Englishman whilst he took off his turban and arranged his long, black hair, a thing he never did in front of the villagers.

“Why,” said the Englishman, “you’ve got all your hair. I thought—but, of course, you are not a native, are you? That accounts for it, I suppose.”

Lovat smiled, talked trivialities for a bit, and then said suddenly :

“I want to leave this place—at any rate, for a time. Would your Company find me work to do, and pay me, and let me trade a little for myself? I can speak Hindi, Bengali, one or two dialects (not well), and I think I would be a good servant.”

“I think you would,” replied Masters. “I will put in a word for you when the others come. We need an interpreter, I know.”

Two more days went by. Masters’ duty, Lovat knew, was to fraternise with the villagers. This he had done, ignorantly, at first, by smiling at the babies and patting the little children on the head. Then Lovat

warned him against both practices which were regarded superstitiously by the villagers. It was after that that Masters appeared to welcome a very much closer acquaintance with Lovat himself, whom he regarded as the best asset his people had got in the village, and to whom he described in interesting detail the formation and resources of the New East India Company.

On the third morning Lovat again heard Parbati moving about in the dark. He said again :

"What are you doing?" Again she answered, softly and persuasively :

"Dear husband, I am going out to cut grass."

"We don't need grass. The animals are at pasture," he replied in a sleepy growl, and had actually dropped off again by the time she was out of the hut. By daybreak she had not returned, so he gave the child some food, commended him to the care of a neighbour, shouldered the agricultural implements and went off to the fields, supposing that she had gone to the sanctuary tree in the clearing beyond the well to pray to the village gods before she returned to her house. The things he was carrying were heavy, so he did not go that way to see whether she was there, but went straight away on to his fields and commenced his work.

He worked with his usual vigour and concentration, and at midday sat down to rest, as he always did, in a shady patch on the edge of the next man's field. His neighbour joined him and they gossipped a bit, and their wives came, and the picnic meal progressed just as happily as usual.

When Parbati had gone, Lovat sacrificed his mid-

day sleep, as he had been doing for many days, to walk over and chat with the Englishman. There was no sign of him either inside or outside his hut, but on the threshold, and on his bed, which, apparently, he had pulled out of the stuffy, dark interior of the house to lie at ease under the branches as the Indians themselves often did in the midday rest-time, was a great quantity of blood. It was fly-covered and crawling, thick and dark in the dust, and Lovat's first thought was that a wild beast, probably a tiger, had dragged him away to the jungle.

He made all speed to the village to spread the news. Soon all work on the fields was at a standstill, and the villagers, led by the headman and the tracker, were on their way to the Englishman's hut, not with much idea of going after the tiger, but partly out of curiosity and partly to impress the other Englishmen, when they came, with an account of their zealous behaviour. All were carrying weapons or noisy instruments. Even the priest was there with the temple conch, although whether for the purpose of scaring the tiger, seeing the fun, or keeping in touch with the gods in an hour of danger, Lovat had no idea. Lathis, axes, reaping hooks and spades had all been brought, and the headman carried a gun of a type which was far more likely to explode in his hands than to harm the tiger if they found it.

Lovat was nervous. He hoped that the tiger had gone to the depths of the jungle, too far for the villagers to follow. The villagers also were nervous; the various expressions on their faces would have amused him had he not been as much afraid for his own skin as they seemed to be for theirs.

Keeping very closely bunched, they penetrated a little grove of trees, not the jungle proper. They had not far to go before they found the body. The trail of blood led directly towards a thickish copse not a hundred yards from the hut. No one would enter the copse until the tracker pointed out that there was nothing to show that a tiger had ever been near it, and then they advanced but slowly, a foot at a time. The route by which the Englishman had been taken was clearly marked, not only by the blood, but by crushed and broken plants which made a path-way easy enough to follow, and down it, letting Lovat take the lead, the party, making noise to wake the dead, crept anxiously. They parted the undergrowth with their lathis, threshed about, and suddenly found the body. The caste men hastily retreated. Lovat, forgetting his part, bent down and dragged the man out by the legs. The body was headless, but the clothing was unmistakable. The tracker, who was a Kadir, had strange beliefs unpalatable to Brahmins, and wore an elephant tooth round his neck to signify that he worshipped Shiva. He volunteered to find the head if somebody else would pick it up when he found it. The scavenger was given this task, as he could not be polluted, and the head was found not very far from the body.

"This is not tiger's work," said the tracker, backing away.

The village was highly excited. Lovat went back later on and buried the man, and said a prayer over the grave. There were no boulders handy, however, and he knew that jackals would dig up the corpse and they, and the vultures after them, feast on it.

(2)

In response to pressure brought to bear by Lovat, the headman called a village council. It was a very serious matter that the Englishman should have died. They must all agree upon what had happened, and tell the same tale when the other Englishmen came. It was essential that the fault should be laid to wild beasts or dacoits—dacoits, he thought, would be better, because that would account for the fact that the head was cut off, if anyone remarked on that fact.

When the Englishmen had been told some plausible story, and were not offended any longer, and had made the trade and had taken their departure for the time, it would be possible to make an investigation, the headman continued naïvely.

Lovat said: "But if you can persuade the Englishmen that dacoits did it—and really I expect that is what has happened—why do you need to make an investigation?"

The headman looked at him sideways.

"Why should we think it was dacoits who killed the Englishman?"

"Well, dacoits are thieves and—all his property is gone."

"It is gone, yes. But all of it was there when first we found him."

"It isn't there now," said Lovat. He had discovered this for himself when he went to bury the body, for he thought that there might be letters which could be given to the other Englishmen when they came, so that they could get in touch with his relatives and tell them the news of his death.

"No. I have it all myself. But I did not kill him," said the headman.

That night, and for many nights, they beat the drums to scare off evil spirits, and the priest made all sorts of preparations in case the ghost of the dead man decided to haunt the village. After the child was asleep, Lovat told Parbati what had happened, although she had not asked him any questions, but merely covered her ears against the noise of the drums. Lovat knew that she was afraid of the ghost and was not at all affected by the noise, so he comforted her, and she slept at last, and, later, so did he. Neither of them woke at the usual time, but were awakened by the child, who was tired of seeing them sleeping and wanted his morning meal. Lovat, who felt better after the rest, laughed when he found how late they were, and asked Parbati, teasingly, why she had not cut grass that morning.

"There is no need to cut grass any more. I will clean your sickle to-day and give it back to you," she replied.

It was a mercy, Lovat thought, that her fears, so wild in the darkness, had fled, with all other shadows, before the morning sun. He kissed her, shouldered his primitive plough, and went off to work after his meal. That afternoon he slept with the other husbandmen in the shade at the edge of his field, and went nowhere near the desolate little hut on the other side of the water.

He dreaded the return of the other Englishmen for a bit, but the days passed without them, and he brooded less, slept dreamlessly again, and put them out of his mind. In the end they came back towards

the close of May, when the weather was beginning to be hot. Nothing further had been said in the village about the death, since the first excitement had died down. Parbati had returned Lovat's sickle, and Lovat, who realised that he knew by no means all the workings of her mind, accepted it with thanks and made no comment.

It was not until their boat came into view that he decided he would speak to the men in English, tell them the story which the villagers had prepared, and then ask them to take him back with them to their settlement.

This plan he carried out. The villagers' story of dacoits carried conviction, apparently, and was accepted. Lovat's English seemed to surprise the men more than the death of their friend had done, and when they had listened to him and had heard the tale of his half-Indian, half-Portuguese ancestry, they agreed to let him go with them. They stayed in the village for a month, collecting and shipping off the produce, and paid for it honestly, according to the agreement. It was not until the last night of their stay that Lovat, who had dreaded breaking the news, told Parbati that he was going with them.

"But," he added hastily, "I shall return. I go but to see a little more of the country. This is a small village, and I grow weary of being here. I would rather be a trader than a farmer."

"But," she burst out, as she hugged the little boy closer, and faced him over the top of the child's dark head, "why then did I kill the man who was going to take you away?"

"Kill the man?" said Lovat, stupidly. Again he saw his sickle in her hand.

"Of course. He was bad. He was wicked. He would have had you go with him. You would not have come back to me. I killed him, and now—and now still you go!"

He stared at her, and she at him. Their minds were utterly divided, and they had not the slightest mutual comprehension of one another's thoughts and feelings.

"*You* killed him, then?" said Lovat.

"If I can, I kill all my enemies," she replied. "Are they not worthy of death? What are they to me? But you are my life. You are all that I have. You gave me *my* son, and I bore *your* son for you. Look at him! Look! Dear husband, dear lord, do not leave us. You cannot leave us! We shall die! I know we shall die! I shall jump into the river with my son. No, no. You take him. I will die because—I will die."

She pushed the little boy towards his father, but Lovat shook his head and left the hut, and went to find the headman of the village.

"I know who killed the Englishman," he said. The headman nodded indulgently.

"It was a good deed," he said. "Nobody is angry. Even the Englishmen, they are not angry now. It is all finished. It is good to kill our enemies. So we are taught—it is good."

"But what harm had the man done?" asked Lovat. The headman opened his arms and let them fall—a fatalistic gesture.

"Who can tell? These men are all alike. They take our women and use them and cast them away. Then are the women dishonoured, and they have

no more favour with us. It is all very bad and very wicked."

Lovat went back to Parbati.

"What did the Englishman say to you?" he asked. "Or what did he do, that you killed him?" She looked at him very sadly, before she answered:

"He said nothing, and I said nothing. He was asleep on his bed, with his head hanging over the side. It was easy to kill him. I did not hurt him. I did not mean to hurt him. I do not think he was very long awake. He died quickly, the best way to die."

"Who dragged him into the thicket?"

"I told some poor men to do that. I could not touch a dead man. It is pollution. They answered me that they would not, but I threatened them and cursed them, and then they did."

Lovat turned away without a word. She held out her hands to him, but he would not touch her nor speak to her any more. He would not go to his bed, but sat all night in a corner of the hut, propped up against the wall. Parbati did not plead, but she moaned and wailed. Lovat would not go near her. She came over to him, embraced his feet and his knees, and then implored him to kill her rather than hate her or leave her.

"For what have I done," she said, "except to keep you if I could? He would have taken you. He would have made you forget me—me and my son! Be merciful, for I love you! Should I not fight and kill for what is my own?"

But Lovat would not answer her; or, rather, could not, and next day the little boy cried when

his father went away in the boat with the English merchants. Parbati did not cry. She went to the headman and said :

“ You will make your young men work on my husband’s fields, because my husband will make much wealth for the village. He will come back, often, often. Again and again he will come, and everybody will be rich.”

Chapter Fifteen

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(I)

FOR MORE THAN A YEAR LOVAT WORKED WITH THE merchant adventurers without setting foot in Calcutta. His knowledge of the language and his ability to treat with the people were valuable to his employers, and as time went on he began to consider whether it would not be wise, after all, to put his fortunes to the test, return to the settlement, present himself boldly and find out what reception would be accorded to him.

By husbanding his pay and by making opportunities for himself, he had managed to acquire enough money to give him the chance of private trading if the Old Company would have him back and if the same facilities were available to the Company's servants as before.

One day, therefore, he took his leave, with mutual regrets, of the gentlemen who had employed him, got a boatman to row him to one of the new landing-stages and, dressed now in English clothes, periwig, shoes, long-skirted coat and beaver hat (and feeling, incidentally, hot and uncomfortable in them) he presented himself, after preliminary pecuniary negotiations with servants, on the governor's veranda and asked for an interview.

To his surprise he was received without question and with acclamation. The truth was that the Old

Company were in the unhappy plight of being overshadowed and outdone by their rivals. Tremendous sums of money had been subscribed in England towards the formation of the New Company, and its activities had become rather frightening. The Old Company had fought gallantly, but the time had come when many gentlemen on both sides believed that if rivalry were to give way to amalgamation it would be more profitable for all concerned, and a school of thought was growing up which advocated the pooling of all resources, men, money and goodwill, against the time (not so far off, some believed) when the French became a serious menace in India to English trade and prosperity.

Lovat, therefore, well-informed on all counts, it appeared, was received, welcomed, caused gossip among the ladies, received all the privileges accorded to the Company's servants, gave a carefully edited but truthful account of some of his adventures, and became a staunch supporter of the amalgamators.

On the whole, life at the settlement seemed to go on very much as it had done before. There were many new faces; Deborah had married one of the factors and they had returned to live in England upon his spoils; there were a good many more English people than there had been, the fortifications were completed and were considered very handsome and comforting, more ships lay in the river, Dabindra looked twenty years older, the human sacrifices offered at Kalighat were still the scandal of the settlement, and it was an often-repeated assertion that the English must do something about them. There were also the usual rumours (true, Lovat felt quite certain) of sakti

in the jungle villages, whereupon some of the younger gentlemen proposed a sight-seeing party to witness the orgies. However, on the urgent representations of the governor, who was clear that to irritate Indians was not conducive to trade, they gave up the idea, not altogether unthankfully, perhaps. Some things remained unchanged for Lovat, notably the great sheet of water, the tank, which was still the mirror of the sunsets, often cloudy, which closed the bright Indian day.

In the end, negotiations were completed, the Old Company and the New joined forces, and Lovat, who had taken full advantage of all his chances, began to be a rich man, even as nabobs went, and that was saying a good deal.

He was tired, though, and not happy, and had worked extremely hard to forget Parbati and his son, and the curious, eventful life he had led among Indians, when, instead of working, he might have had rest and pleasure. He decided to go back to England, and, if he had been a woman, would have wept as he made the decision ; for he loved the strange land of his adoption ; he hungered for the waterways and the villages ; for the society of the friendly, savage, curiously gentle people ; for their giggling self-effacement and petty vanity ; their cowardliness and conscious artistry ; their religions, noble and base ; the effeminate beauty of the young men ; the dignity of the old men ; and the unfailing, unflagging fascination of the land, its colours, its buildings and its customs.

It is possible that he might have reconsidered his decision, but for the troublous times which had

followed the death of the Emperor Aurangzeb. Each of the Emperor's sons laid claim to his throne, for he had not named his successor. One prince was slain in battle, another died of his wounds, and even after the eldest son at last ascended the throne, there seemed to be no stability, and no one among the Moguls equal to the task of subduing his enemies to his service. Marathas, Rajputs and Sikhs were successively in arms, and, in such times as those, Lovat saw clearly that unless he transported his wealth to England he might very well lose it altogether.

The Company's immediate reaction to the death of the old Emperor was to undertake reprisals for what the merchants considered they had suffered in loss of trade and prestige, but their bold and predatory policy was not to Lovat's taste. He, and the other more thoughtful, less greedy Englishmen, foresaw that while such an attitude might result in increased gain for the Company for a time, it could have nothing but a bad effect upon prospects later. To conciliate the Indians, more especially those in power, and not to add to the difficulties of the time, seemed to these men a more intelligent as well as a more humanitarian method of consolidating the Company's gains.

However, Lovat and the minority with him were out-voted, and, glad to think that he would be able to see his mother and sisters again, he thought he would take the next ship, and get back to England for the spring.

He did this, got past the pirate coast without trouble, and reached his home about eight days after Christmas, when the holly and ivy still hung in the room beyond

the hall, and the still trees loomed in the lake in long dark reflections that went the whole width of the water. His mother was feeding the swans. He called to her from the muddy path that bordered the ancient turf, and was shocked, when she turned, to see her so much older. One of his sisters was married—it startled him to hear that. The other was still at home, but, instead of the child he had known, a girl of nineteen came to greet him, and he wondered whether he ought to kiss her, or whether she would think it a liberty. So he put his arm round her gently, and she kissed him with vigorous goodwill, for to her the man of thirty who had returned was recognisable as the brother of twenty who had gone away, but the little girl of eight from whom he had parted was by no means, for Lovat, this handsome, lively girl to whom, in fact, so far as he could see, she bore not the slightest resemblance.

His father, he realised, was almost overwhelmed with joy at seeing him again, and he understood, although nothing was said about it, that his father had given him up for dead, but that his mother had always expected to see him alive again.

He did not like, that first evening, to ask whether Margaret was married, and his mother volunteered no information. They sat, the four of them, in the room at the front of the house, the room whose windows looked out, at the side of the Elizabethan porch, over the smooth, semi-circular front lawn. The house was not far from the road, and the stables were less than a stone's throw from where the family was seated round the huge open fireplace which had the family crest and its motto cut in the stone above the grate.

He and his father talked horses ; but the sister was avid for news and descriptions of India, so the talk went on into the night, and supper had been done for three hours before they would let him go to bed.

The staircase, with its carved wooden lions, each holding the arms of the house or the arms of families with whom the house had been united in marriage, was as familiar, he found, as though he had never gone away. His sister walked up the stairs beside him, her arm about his waist. She kissed him good night when they reached the door of her room, and he, with his candle held high, crossed the landing to go to his own.

His mother had not had it altered. His possessions—touchingly boyish, they looked to him now—were arranged as he had left them, and nothing was broken or missing. He guessed that no servant had ever dusted that room ; he could see his mother's dark face as she bent over table and chair, or dusted the great carved ends and the lofty supports of the big, old four-poster bed.

He went to the window and looked out. There lay the lake, and beyond it there was the wood. Beyond both lay the park, the home farm, and the road to London. He could distinguish, in the gloom, the greater gloom of the forest. It was good to be home. He had not realised how restful and good it would be ; how clean ; how fresh-smelling and cold.

His mother came in, as she had done ever since he had had a room of his own, to bid him good night, and have a last, brief talk before she went to her bed. He said, as they sat in the dark, his mother in a chair at the bedside :

"How is Margaret, Mother?"

"Married, these five years, Lovat."

"I hoped she would be." This, he realised, was true. He fell asleep thinking of Parbati.

(2)

He met Margaret during the following week, for his family were invited to visit friends ten miles off, and she was there with her husband, a tall, thin officer of Pearce's Regiment which had been one of four to ship to Catalonia in the War. The soldier kept the conversation considerably to himself by recounting his adventures, and Lovat, quietly watching, and summing up Margaret, was glad to be unobserved, although he listened to very little of what her husband had to say about the Spanish campaign.

Margaret, he thought, looked pale. He heard from his sister, later, that she had had a child and had lost it at two years old. It seemed strange to him that she could have married, and borne a child and lost it, and that he had known nothing about it, but had come home to see her pale and quiet and anxious, a different person, it seemed, from the eager girl to whom he had said good-bye underneath the cedar tree.

He spent part of his time in London and called upon the Company in Leadenhall Street and gave the gentlemen there an account of matters in India. At the conclusion of the interview they asked him whether he would ever go back to Calcutta.

"No," he replied. "I shall never go back. At least, I do not believe so. The climate is trying, and

conditions are more complicated and difficult than is realised here in England.

"Is it true, Mr. Cleave," asked one, "that you have spent several months among the Indians, learning their customs and their language?"

"Years, not months," said Lovat.

"It is a highly creditable thing to have done," they told him. "You have acted in our best interests, Mr. Cleave."

Lovat bowed; his smile was not ironical. He was surprised that they had received no intimation of his reasons for having left the settlement so abruptly, and for having remained away from it so long, and mentally thanked the factors for having kept their own counsel.

He described the interview to his mother. She said, with her quick look, and her dark, sardonic smile:

"I suppose you had got into trouble, had you, out there?"

"Yes, Mother," he replied. "I had killed a man."

"Duelling?"

"No. I killed him in self-defence. But I need not have done it, I believe. I lost my head, as I did with the keeper here." He told her the story simply and truthfully, leaving nothing unsaid.

"And why did you come home, son?"

"I——" He well knew the reason for his home-coming. He knew why he had worked so hard and so steadily for the factors of the New Company. He knew why he had pretended to himself that his wealth was not safe in India, and that he had better bring it to England before he lost it.

He had come home because he wanted his Indian wife ; he had worked to try to forget her.

He looked at his mother and found her regarding him steadfastly. He knew something else then, too—that he was looking into the eyes of a dying woman. She saw the startled knowledge in his face, and smiled and put her hand to her fallow throat.

“Yes, you are right. I am glad to have seen you again. Stay with me for a little while, my son, and then go back and find peace.”

He knew that he would obey her, not from duty but altogether from inclination. He went over to her, and put his arms about her hard, thin body, and bent his dark face to hers.

“Very well, Mother,” he said.

“After all,” she said cheerfully, when he had gone back to the window to gaze out over the park, “I’m fifty-four and I won’t let the doctor bleed me. I haven’t much blood to lose. Lovat, when the time comes, if you are here——”

“I shall be here, Mother. I will send for a priest.”

“I’ve been a sad renegade, Lovat. All these years, and I’ve been to the English Church and listened to heretical sermons, and I’ve never been to Mass, not even on Christmas Eve or on Easter Day. It is Father Hilton, over at Yencleave, Lovat. He’ll understand, and absolve me. It was a sin I committed when I married your father. But I could not reconcile two loves.”

“Can anyone, Mother, do you think ?”

His bitterness betrayed him. He had turned from the window to face her again, and she could not see his face for the light behind his head ; but the

tone of his voice was conclusive. She did not question him. They had always, when they wished, been reticent one with the other. It was the basis of their confidence in each other.

The rest of his stay was happy. Deliberately, because he knew she wished it, he put from him the thought of his mother's approaching death. His father, he very soon realised, did not know how ill she was. He took his son round the home farm, found him horses to ride, and soon, when the spring days came, they were hard at work on plans to enlarge the house, for Lovat had money to spend.

He went with his sister to London and they jolted in coaches, stuck two or three hours in the mud, were bruised, shaken up, and held up by highway robbers. These were frightened off, however, by the appearance of the regular mail, whose guard let off his piece and whose outside passengers also proved to be armed.

Among such comparatively mild excitements and interests, Lovat spent more than two years. Christmas came, and its festivities, and the new year with its cold weather which lasted into March. There were country sports, birthday celebrations, the crops springing, the great time of the harvest, and then autumn with its berries and brown leaves—they went to stay with relations in Cheshire for six weeks, and celebrated the second Christmas there, and there his sister became engaged to a nobleman's third son. It was a suitable arrangement in every way. The nobleman's son was impoverished; Lovat's sister, thanks to a gift from her brother, was comparatively wealthy; neither was in love with the other, but there was a mutual feeling of liking which Alice Cleave confided to her son she would

certainly trust to last as long as love. Sir William was pleased with the match, and Lovat, shaking hands with a tall and pleasant-faced man, thought that his sister would be happy.

The Cleaves returned home in mid-January to find ice on the lake and the swans in the care of the servants, most of whom were, with good reason, afraid of the large savage birds. The sunshine was bright and pleasant, and Alice Cleave and Lovat walked in the garden every day.

As there seemed no reason for delaying the marriage, it was arranged to take place in May. There were great preparations. Alice Cleave survived the wedding. Sir William travelled to town with the couple after the honeymoon was over. They had spent it at the bridegroom's father's castle. Sir William stayed to see his daughter settled down among her new possessions, and so Lovat and his mother had two weeks together alone. They did not go outside their own demesne. Alice Cleave did not trouble to keep up appearances with her son. He knew, almost as certainly as she knew, that she was failing very fast. They took very short walks from the house to the side of the lake, where they sat and read and talked, and she embroidered in large, bright stitches, or began making clothes for her younger daughter's baby. Lovat—for they always laughed together—told her that this was indelicate anticipation of an event which could not be less than half a year off at best. It was then that she laid her work down and stroked it absently with one finger. Then she said :

“But, you know, I shan't be here in six months' time.”

She died in her sleep the day before her husband came home from London. Lovat had been for the priest on the previous day. She had caught a chill which turned to fever, and her weakened heart could not cope with the onslaught of the illness.

Sir William was bewildered and lost. Lovat, who now longed to get away, feeling that he could not bear the house without his mother—for he and his father had never been particularly good friends—felt that he could not go until his father had survived the first shock of his loss. So he stayed on until the next summer, saw his father's widowed sister established as housekeeper, visited his own two sisters, staying a month with each, and then, without going back home, he went to the Company's offices and applied to be sent back to India. They commissioned him to go to Calcutta again, and gave him letters to the Governor.

He thought his father showed relief when he went home from London to break the news. He could understand it. The deep colour he had acquired under Indian suns had worn to English pallor. He was clean-shaven, thin-faced, hollow-eyed, and still bore traces of the grief which the death of his mother had caused him ; consequently, if he went into a darkened room and looked into the mirror which hung among cherubs' heads, carved fruit and ears of corn, and the opened pea-shucks of the wood-carving over the fireplace, it was her face that, ghost-like, looked back at him out of the glass. His father could never be free of thoughts of his mother whilst he was there to be seen—her image, and not the less so because he was a man.

He took ship, finally, in the April of the year in which the Queen died, and did not hear of the death of Her Majesty and the accession of the Elector of Hanover until he had been in Calcutta three or four weeks. He was kindly received, and was almost immediately included in a party of the Company's servants who were to visit the new Mogul emperor, the successful rebel Farrukh-Siyar, at Delhi. Lovat accepted office as one of the deputation, but was extremely troubled at the thought of going north without making some attempt to visit Parbati and his son. All thought of her crime had been overlaid in his mind by the knowledge that he needed her. Now that his mother was dead, and Margaret married, there was no woman except Parbati in his life, and he longed to see her again.

He had been assigned an Indian lad as his servant, and for a week he scarcely glanced at the boy who was obviously very young. But he made an assiduous servant, and was so intelligent that Lovat, preoccupied though he was, began to take notice of him. The boy was shy, but not with the primitive, animal shyness of Lal. His was the shyness of youth, and of a person not accustomed, Lovat concluded, to Englishmen and their ways ; yet the way in which he could anticipate every want, and yet give no impression of being persistent, in the way, or a nuisance, was restful and delightful. Lovat determined to take him as his personal servant when the deputation went to the Mogul court.

"What is your name ?" he said to him one day. The boy put his palms together beneath his chin, bowed courteously, and answered :

"I call myself Narayan, master."

"Will you come on a long journey with me, Narayan?"

"Yes, if you wish it. I am your servant, and I am at your orders."

"We start next week."

"Next week? I must go to my village. You will permit me?"

"Certainly. May I come with you to your village? I used to know the villages round here."

The boy bowed again, and next day they went by boat down the broad, brown river. Lovat had a presentiment that the village would be Parbati's, and was not in the least surprised when the boy told the boatman to pull into the side and take the tributary channel which Lovat knew as well as he knew his own circumscribed lake at home.

But the boy went, not up the main village street, but straight to the poorest quarters where lived the outcastes, the untouchables. Lovat stopped short, and held his arm.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To my mother's house. We are outcaste." He spoke with a strange mixture of defiant pride and of shame. "My father left us many years ago. Word came that he was not a Brahmin, as he had always told everyone in the village, but an Englishman, and wicked."

Lovat said to himself, again with no feeling of surprise :

"This boy is my son ; Parbati's son." He said :

"What did you say they called you?"

"Narayan, master."

"But you have another name—Krishna." The boy shook his head, and, although he smiled politely, he looked puzzled.

"Not now. Do you know the meaning of my name? I am called Narayan because the waters were my first dwelling-place."

"And Brahma took the name, and Vishnu stole it, and Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu," said Lovat, suddenly laughing. The boy looked startled. Then he knelt down, and said, with joy :

"My father. And not a wicked man. A good man, lord. My father."

(3)

Parbati looked dreadfully old. That, to Lovat's subsequent shame, was the first impression he received of her. The second, equally unpalatable, was that it was impossible to conceive that he had ever been physically in love with her. The boy sat apart from them, cross-legged, calm and princely. Lovat, looking across at him from time to time, could not see any trace in him, either of feature or colouring, to show that he had English blood. He had Parbati's beauty—the beauty she had had when Lovat knew her first—and a serenity wholly Indian. Parbati gave them both a little cooked rice—the only food she had.

The headman who had promised to take care of them both was dead ; he had died when the boy was ten. The new headman learned that Lovat had gone to England. He made up his mind that he would never come back to the village.

"He knew," Parbati said, "that you were without caste. He said that you were an Englishman, and

he beat us and cast us out. I sent our son to the English, and told him to see that he served you. I knew that you would come back."

Lovat looked at her, amazed. Her pale colouring, one of her great attractions for a European husband, had given place to the darker hue of strong sunburn. Her skin, once smooth, and her hands, at one time slender and unblemished, were roughened and coarsened. Her palms were those of a woman accustomed to hard manual labour out in the open fields. Only her eyes had not changed.

He remained with her until evening ; then she said :
"There are empty shops in the market-place. Will you lodge in the village to-night ? "

Deeply ashamed, because he knew that he could not bear to share her bed, he said, with the haste of nervousness :

"I return to the settlement, Parbati. Soon I go north, with some others, to the Mogul emperor's court. Shall I take our son with me ? He will have to go as my servant. I cannot acknowledge him. I hope you will understand. I would like to claim him, but I cannot."

She replied :

"Whatever seems good, do that, and the gods will love thee."

He said :

"Do *you* love me, Parbati ? "

"I am too old for love," she answered calmly, "and my son is now a man. Maybe I shall go on pilgrimage. The gods know my sin."

He knew that she meant, not the murder of the English trader, but the flight with Lovat from sati.

INDIAN RAIN

He laughed. Imaginative sympathy, always his greatest gift, came suddenly to aid his understanding. He said : " I will stay in your hut to-night. Let all that has gone remain in the lap of Indra." All repugnance gone, he looked into her eyes before she could lower them, and kissed her as he had kissed her before the boy was born. She would not let him stay in her hut, however. There were quarters ready for him in the village. He was ashamed, again, for his sex and his English blood, when he felt relief at the arrangement. She was old. She looked, now, nearly as old as his mother had looked when she died.

" You go to the north," she said. " The gods dwell in the north among the mountains. Make pilgrimage. Let my son make pilgrimage, too. You go for your own sake, he for his mother's sin. Perhaps we shall meet there. Who knows ? "

Chapter Sixteen

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(1)

LOVAT REMAINED IN THE VILLAGE ANOTHER TWO DAYS. Then he told Parbati that he ought to return to the settlement, and offered to take her with him, and find her a home in the quarters given to Indian wives of the factors. She refused. When they parted she said a curious thing.

“Take our son, and let him be your servant. May you be to him as King Shivi, who bore his own son, in fulfilment of the promise of Agni, god of fire. For the son of Shivi was not found in the womb of his queen, but came forth, at the instance of the god, from the King’s side.”

The deputation proper had already left for Delhi when he had presented himself at the settlement, so he and Narayan, with two Eurasian interpreters and an escort of the Company’s breeched but barefoot soldiers, followed by boat, and, because they made no stops until they came to Benares, caught up the main party before they arrived at Delhi.

The Mogul city was bewildering and fascinating, from the slums at its gates to the magnificence of its mosques and the Emperor’s palace. The tall, carved, wooden-fronted houses, with their grilles, verandahs and iron-studded doors, were a delight to Lovat and, in a different sense, to Narayan, for the

handsome boy was pestered with assignments, passwords were whispered in his ears by old Moslem women in the market-place, flowers dropped at his feet from high, wooden-screened windows, and jasmin scent was sprinkled on his garments whenever he followed Lovat about the city.

Lovat's part in the mission was merely to act as interpreter with the Eurasians. His Persian was better than theirs. With the actual negotiations he had little to do, for his absences from the Company's service had left him with little knowledge of its affairs.

The agents were entertained, during their stay, with the extraordinary extravagance which legend had always attributed to the Mogul emperors. Feasts, at which all the plate—a good deal of it made of priceless jade—was decorated with jewels; elephant fights; barbarous executions; displays of dancing and swordsmanship; military exercises; moonlight orgies during which a hundred concubines bathed naked before the Emperor and his guests, were all employed to impress the deputation with the wealth and power of the pretender.

Farrukh-Siyar himself was a mean-looking, cruel and weakly man, with nothing, in Lovat's eyes, to recommend him. The mission, which had for its object the improvement of the existing relations between the Company and the jealous Mogul court, was, so far as it went, successful, but long before the factors were prepared to leave again for Calcutta, Narayan, who had seen men trampled to death by elephants, the slow execution of a man being chopped to pieces, burnings, beatings, the extorting of money

by torture, and other official and semi-official cruelties, said urgently, several times :

"When do we leave this place? There are ghosts here. I do not think it is good."

"It is very bad," Lovat replied, "but we cannot go until all the business is over."

He was glad when the time came to go. They went as they had come, by elephant and then on the river, but on the homeward journey they went further north towards the foothills of the mountains, and saw, in the rosy light, the mountain peaks, far off and very beautiful. The boy said :

"When I give up the world, I shall go there. There Shiv is, and the great ones are there enthroned ; and beyond them those who die not. I know. My mother has told me."

The peaks were unearthly in their glory. Lovat believed, with his son, that it would be a good thing to go on pilgrimage to the mountains—not devoutly, seeking the Hindu gods, but to satisfy a hunger which the sight of the dazzling snow-peaks had awakened. He thought of the journey night and day, as their craft sailed slowly down the river, and often glanced at the boy who sat so proud, unmoving and handsome, with the rowers ; then Lovat would stare at the rowers, not thinking consciously about them, but watching their lazy efforts, and the brown water flowing, the villages and the temples along the banks, the ooze, the occasional crocodiles, the half-burned, partly eaten corpses washed down from the funeral ghats, the changing vegetation, the forests, the rice and the mustard, the mangoes, banyans and swamps. When they were back the boy said :

"Now I feel that I know my country. Is India my country?"

"Yes, it is your country, and so is England. When I return, I will take you with me to England."

"And my mother, what of her?" He shook his head and smiled. "There is no wrong. It is fate, and we cannot guard against it, or alter it, my father. I cannot go with you to England."

"How old are you?" said Lovat. It was a comment on the solemnity of the talk, and not a question at all, but the boy took it literally, and answered:

"I do not know. I am a man. How old is that—to be a man?"

(2)

It was a half-life, and unsatisfactory even at that, Lovat thought. He remained for three months in the settlement, and then took his leave, abruptly, one morning, of the governor, resigned from the Company's service again, and went down-river to his village.

His village! He sought out his wife, but could not find her.

"She is gone," they said, when he asked them. Their simple, cow-like expressions and gentle eyes angered him for a moment. Frightened, they retreated, keeping their faces towards him to see how soon he would strike. But Lovat dropped his arm, and walked to the headman's house. The headman was busy with tillage. When found, he could tell Lovat nothing. Lovat accused him of hounding Parbati from the village. The headman protested, sadly and earnestly, that he had done nothing of the kind.

His clothing consisted of a loincloth and the huge Bengali hat which farmers wore against the heat of the sun. He was not a young man, and his scrubby beard was grizzled. His thin, brown, bent old legs were splashed to the buttocks in mud. His son was with him, helping him with the ploughing.

"I did not wish her any harm. I would have cared for her, but, when the caste found out, they were very angry, and set upon her, yes, and upon the boy and drove them out of the village. Therefore they lived among untouchables, and I—what could I do?"

"My mother is not dead," said the boy. "Perhaps she has gone to her people. She has told me about her people." They questioned everybody in the village. Lovat retained his English dress; he thought it would help to give him standing in the village. In the end he found two men who seemed to have information. They said that they had been fishing one day when Parbati came up and asked them to lend her a boat.

"We would not lend it," they said, "because she was not of our caste, and we did not know what caste she belonged to. We knew, too," they added, with simple truthfulness, "that she could give us nothing in return."

"And what then?" asked Lovat.

"Then the woman asked us to let her do some work on our fields in return for the loan of the boat, but again we refused. We have only a small field each, and on those there is not enough work for another person to do. So we spoke roughly to the woman, and threatened her, and told her to leave us. She was afraid that we might curse her, and so she went."

"Where? In what direction did she go?"

"In that direction, lord, against the flowing of the stream."

So Lovat and the boy paddled upstream until they came to a village, and there they landed, and sat down underneath the village tree and talked with those who came. There was news, but whether news of Parbati, or of some other woman, they could not tell.

"A holy woman came to our shores in the evening, and sat for three days without food. What we gave her she did not touch, and she begged for nothing. On the fourth day she ate a little rice and drank water. Then she spoke to us, telling us the legends of the gods, and we, like children, gathered about her and listened to what she said. She told us many good things out of the holy books. She had nobody with her, but she was earnest and we believed the things she told us. On the fifth day she fasted again and on the sixth day she fell into a deep sleep so that we thought she was dead. But on the seventh day she awoke and took more food, and told us the story of Nola and Damayanti."

"My mother used to tell me that story," said Narayan eagerly, "and when she came to the words which Nola spoke to the messenger of Damayanti she would embrace me, and weep, and say : 'Do you think so, Narayan? Is it true about *me*?' And I would say that it was true."

"What words were those?" asked Lovat.

"'Good women never become angry, and hold their lives protected by the armour of good character, even though deserted by their husbands,'" the boy replied.

"Which way did the holy woman go when she left

the village?" asked Lovat. The villagers pointed upstream. So Parbati's husband and son stepped into their boat again and rowed on. At village after village they enquired for her, but although they got news of her fairly frequently, at last, after weary weeks of often dangerous travelling, during which he again wore the native dress and passed again for an Indian, Lovat made up his mind that the holy woman could not have been his wife, and that they must be on the wrong trail.

"Let us, at any rate, catch up with the holy woman, and discover whether she is my mother or not," said Narayan, in his gentle, persuasive way. So on they went again, further and further west and north, until they were in country of which neither knew anything at all. Lovat, who, in English dress, had scarcely thought of the Thugs, began to fear them again, but still they pursued a vanishing trail into the interior of the province, until, at last, they could get no news at all.

One night they were camping on the banks of a small river, but keeping to their boat which was moored underneath a tree, when they saw, in the jungle, lights. They beat out the embers of their own small fire on the river-bank, and watched to find out what was happening. Lovat loosened the knots in the mooring ropes so that in an instant they could float their boat into midstream. They lay low, and listened to a confused noise of shouting and laughter. Then Lovat said :

"I must go and see what it is."

"It is sakti. Do not go. It is a kind of madness," said the boy.

"But Parbati may be there."

"No, no, she will not be there."

Lovat left him, and crept through the trees. The wildest orgies were in progress, sensual and cruel. The people were maddened with palm-toddy, drugs and excitement. It looked less a religious observance than licentious and horrible savagery. Disgust overcame his curiosity. He went quietly back to the boat, cast off, and they floated downstream and made their way back towards the village. Again they stopped at all the villages at which they had made their enquiries. On the whole they were treated kindly; they were given food, and all their questions were answered, but of useful tidings there were none. They got back at last, and Lovat returned to Calcutta, as unkempt and convincing an object as any native-born mendicant in the land. He made no attempt to return to the Company's service, but he and the boy lived in squalor and poverty with the beggars who sat all day in Kali-ghat, and made enough to live on, and tried to get news of Parbati.

None came, although the mendicants came and went. One day Narayan said to Lovat :

"We ought to go to Benares. If my mother is alive, and has become a holy mendicant, that is where she will be."

This seemed to Lovat good advice. He bought English clothes from a Mohammedan in the bazaar—for he still had money, although they did not spend it, but lived upon what the charitable chose to give them—went to a barber and was shaved, combed his long hair and had the ends cut level, and then went into the bank to draw out some money.

He dined with some of the factors and let it be understood that he was going to Delhi again, on an unofficial visit this time, but perhaps to do business for the Company if opportunity offered. Then he bought Narayan new clothes, chartered a rice-boat, and left, one spring morning, for Benares.

He thought the quest hopeless, but did not say that to the boy. At Benares, among the thousands of visiting pilgrims, the hundreds of resident holy men, the general determination to be washed in the holy waters, the noise, confusion and disease, it seemed impossible that any enquiries could be fruitful. Nevertheless they made them, and one day were directed to a holy man who, their director informed them, was able to project his mind in any direction he chose, and could certainly tell them where the holy woman was to be found.

The holy man, whom they discovered standing on his head practising yoga, kept them waiting until he had concluded his religious exercises, then righted himself and greeted them with great courtesy.

"Give again," he said, looking at Lovat, "that which was given to thee. Make the pilgrimage, and at the appointed time, behold thou shalt make the gift. If thou withhold it, then the quest must fail."

"You speak in riddles, Swami," said Lovat, watching him closely.

"I do not speak anything which concerns me. What I say comes, not from my own mind, but from what is given me to say. Go. I can tell you nothing about your wife. You were married by the Gandharva ceremony—that of mutual acceptance—and the

marriage for her was sin. Now, it may be, she expiates her sin, but that I am not told. That I do not know."

"Yes, but where is she, Swami?"

"As Yudhisthina left heaven to seek for his brothers and Draupadi, so is your quest before you. May it end as happily; yet, remember, all is Illusion."

He sank into meditation, and they left him.

The next day they went to another holy man, and found this one seated upon a tiger skin. He wore nothing but a cotton cloth about his loins, and was a man of fine stature and of marked physical beauty. He rose and greeted them courteously.

"She whom you seek is not in Benares," he said. He sat down again, assumed the lotus posture, and fell into meditation. They remained with him, still and silent, for an hour, and then withdrew. The holy man did not move.

"He is very holy," said Narayan.

"Very holy," Lovat agreed. Both believed that he knew that Parbati was not in Benares. If she had renounced ordinary life and had determined on pilgrimage she would go, they knew, from shrine to shrine until she reached some spot where it seemed to her good to remain. There she would take up her abode until she died. Lovat often thought of what she had told him he must do. He said:

"I shall send you back to Calcutta with letters. Then I shall make the mountain pilgrimage."

"I will go with you," said the boy. "I shall go for my mother's sin. She made me promise, when I was very small—soon after you had left us. It is good to go to the mountains. God is there."

Lovat sat for a long time without speaking, and then said :

"It is too hard for you. I shall go to the mountains and beyond them, and it is very likely that I shall never come back. You will be the heir to my wealth. I will make it clear in my letter to the governor. You shall travel with a company of merchants. I will get you new clothes, so that you may pass as the son of an important official. All can be arranged. Later you will marry, and you will be happy. With my money you can buy land. Remain on good terms with the English. Remember their blood is yours. Now we will sleep, and to-morrow I will make the preparations."

The boy said no more, and the next day was spent in the bazaars, fitting him out with everything he needed. Then merchants of repute were found who were travelling to Calcutta, and the boy was confided to their care. Lovat bought himself the long dark robe of a pilgrim, a pilgrim's staff and sandals, and carried some food and his bedding. Then, briefly, because he could not endure the thought of parting from him, he said good-bye to his son. The boy made no sign that he felt the sadness of parting. With his usual calm gentleness of expression he watched his father go. The oldest merchant touched the boy's shoulder and said :

"Do not grieve. You will see him again."

"I know. I know," said the boy. Dawn found him toiling along the road in the wake of his father. By noon he had caught him up.

"But you were to go to Calcutta," Lovat said, trying to conceal the pleasure he felt at seeing the boy

again. Narayan shook his head. He smiled, and said very gently :

“Not so. I go where you go. That is my promise to my mother. That is the rest of my promise—to go with you and to serve you. For you are my father, and it is my fate to serve you. Besides, I love you.” He smiled again, put his palms together underneath his chin, bowed, and then lowered his eyes. Lovat had not the heart to send him back.

Day after day they tramped, spending very little money on food because Lovat wanted to purchase blankets and warmer clothing when they got further north, and it was colder. They followed the river from Allahabad to Gora, Gora to Kalpi, Kalpi to Agra, and Agra, up the Jumna, to Delhi.

“I know no more of the road,” said Lovat, then. “Here we will stay, and when the spirit moves us, we will go.”

They had walked more than four hundred miles, nearly all in Moslem India, and it seemed to Narayan (or so he said) that they would never get to the mountains. This was the first indication which he had ever given Lovat that he had any sense of time. Up to that moment it had seemed as though he had all an Indian's disregard of the passing of hours and of days. They had been on their pilgrimage for just about a month, and to Lovat it seemed at least six times as long. They had averaged ten to fifteen miles a day—nearer fifteen—and had spent nearly every night in the open along the road. Three times they had slept in cities, but squalidly, and in great mental discomfort because of the large sum of money which Lovat was carrying. However, no one molested them, and

they took care to make no acquaintances on the journey.

They remained in Delhi for ten days, and then heard talk of horse-dealers coming down from the hills with little ponies. They stood in the gateway of the city and waited for them to come in. They came, some wild-looking fellows, and Narayan, less noticeable, being a boy, than Lovat, who might have attracted too much attention, hung round to learn the route by which they had come. He could understand nothing from their speech, which, in Bengali ears, was outlandish. So Lovat took over the task and got into conversation with two of their customers, Moslems purchasing ponies by order of the Emperor's vizier. He learned—the men spoke Hindi, which he understood fairly well—that the Kashmiri men would return as soon as they had disposed of their ponies and had purchased in the bazaar the things that they wanted to take back with them. Bargaining, to them, was a long, slow, battling, enjoyable process, so Lovat made up his mind that a week, at least, could be reckoned upon before they would need to go north. It was nearer a fortnight, and then the Kashmiris set off. Lovat and Narayan gave them a very short start, and then followed, keeping them in view.

The hillmen travelled more quickly than Lovat and Narayan could manage to do, and after the first day they lost sight of them. But their feet were set in the way, and on they travelled, and soon began to find the road going uphill. Walking was pleasant and invigorating as the air became cooler and fresher, and at night they found they slept soundly, partly

because they were tired and partly because the air was good and clear.

One morning they came to a lake and decided to stay beside it all the rest of that day and the whole of the following night. They bathed in the clear, cool water, talked, sang songs, and Lovat felt happier than he had felt since the death of his mother, Alice Cleave. The more he knew his son the better he liked him. The boy had Parbati's gift of remaining silent when Lovat's mood was for quietness. He needed no indication that this was so, but seemed to sense it, and would wander away by himself, or sit there in silence, his grave eyes fixed on the forest trees or the water, and the atmosphere remained companionable, although there was nothing apparently to make it so.

The evening breeze was mild and very pleasant. They looked at the clear sky and at the distant hills, shadowy now at the close of the day, and watched the stars come out. Then they rolled themselves up in their bedding and went to sleep. They knew that wild beasts prowled, but neither felt any fear.

"Here we are with God," said Narayan, in his simple understanding of religion. He had thoughts which Lovat could not emulate, and which he knew must be the result of Parbati's teaching. A thousand, thousand times he thought of his wife. He brought back to his recollection, although it was painful to do so, their early love, the night on which she had told him that, although it was deadly sin for her, a Hindu widow, a woman of the caste of the Brahmins, to take another husband and live with him in his hut, yet their love transcended everything in her

life, and that she would take the Gandharva oath with him, the mutual acceptance one of the other in marriage.

He remembered the joy she had had at the birth of a son ; the shame at the births of the daughters. He remembered her very words, and the sighing voice in which she had uttered them.

"I have done you great wrong, my lord. Forgive your unworthy one. The gods do not look upon me with favour. It is because of the fault which I have committed, that I curse you with many daughters."

And then those daughters had died. He speculated, always with horror, and yet with involuntary sympathy for Parbati, upon the means and manner of those deaths.

He remembered the coming of the Englishmen to the village ; the horrible fate of Masters ; the strange remark of Parbati about the cutting of grass—he ought to have known, he told himself, that such a remark from her was out of character, and therefore must have been subject to another interpretation. He thought of Parbati's guilt, and the headless body. Had the headman given him a hint that the Englishman well deserved his death at Parbati's hands ? It was a question he could not answer. Most of all, he thought (not in vanity), Parbati's fear had not been of Masters himself, but of what he represented ; a power which could work on Lovat and take him out of the village ; take him away and never allow him to come back.

He remembered his own unkindness ; the years he had left her alone ; her sufferings—outcaste and destitute ; the fate of the boy, his son, the noble,

princely boy whom he loved now more than anything in the world.

In the morning again they bathed in the lake, and set their faces northward again for the snows. Soon they came to a village—a small, outlandish place of a dozen huts. There was a market there though, and the travellers, who had finished most of their food, although they had been sparing with it, bought more. They also purchased some sweets, unlike the sickly confections of the plains, but pleasant to taste, and sustaining.

They stayed the night at the village, accommodated in an empty hut which the owner let them have for a present of beads. Soon they reached forest upon the next day's march, and camped on a spur from which they could see the majestic darkness of trees, and the valley dropping below and still well-wooded. A river ran through the valley, too swiftly, Lovat thought at first, to be fordable. But they crossed it, because the water, although swift-flowing, was shallow. Very soon they came to another stream which they crossed, and then they found themselves in the thickness of the dense deciduous forest which mounted the hill.

High up they came to a clearing in which was a little village. The people gave them milk and would take no payment. Indeed, they did not appear to know the use of money, and so payment in kind was offered by Lovat, who began to be in despair when he realised that the wealth he was carrying would no longer be of very much use on the journey. But the villagers, uncouth men with thick beards, refused presents and payments alike, and all the village came out, when they left, to see them go.

Chapter Seventeen

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(1)

FURTHER CLIMBING ON THE FOLLOWING DAY BROUGHT them to the eight thousand feet level. Gradually they had reduced the weight of their packs by putting on extra clothing. This was a very much easier kind of portage, and besides, by this time, they were beginning to feel the cold. The way was now extremely dangerous, but the scenery was good and the path led partly through the forests which, even at that altitude, were still very thick. Oak, deodar, and pine clothed hill-side and valley, and at the villages where they halted the villagers warned them of tigers. There was plenty of drinking water, and the people gave them food. They encountered storms at first, but when they had crossed the next valley and were climbing the further slope, the land was barren and dry. Dusty winds blew suddenly; there were no trees, no more grass or any kind of greenery to be seen, and the landscape was uninteresting.

At last they came to a temple; adjoining it was a small, impoverished village. They were glad to find that there was water, although it was not very good. The villagers said they had plenty of water at times, but that this was not the season. The temple was dedicated to Devi, and the priest, a small, monkey-faced man, surprisingly friendly—for they were not

very much accustomed to kindliness from Brahmins—held them in conversation and set them three or four miles upon their road. He walked untiringly, however, at a hillman's pace which made considerable demands upon their stamina.

The scenery changed again. Forests of teak, a cloudy sky over the mountains, grasslands high up on a plateau, and another village where they stayed the night completed another day's journey.

"When shall we come to the mountains?" Narayan asked. He was answered when, suddenly, during the next day's march they found a north-stretching valley, green as an emerald. Beyond it rose the great mountains, one peak after another, innumerable, capped with snow, half-hidden, at times, in cloud, and then set free, and gleaming in the sun like the gods' mountains, shining and peaceful. Through the long, shallow valley ran a river, reflecting the sky and the clouds. They descended to it and drank, and sat by it, resting and gazing upon the landscape, and listening to the birds which were all about them among the trees. It was a beautiful place. Both were loth to leave it. At evening they came to a shepherd's hut, and spent the night there, sheltering from the cold. In the morning they put on all the rest of their clothing before they set out for the terrible part of their climb. Before they started Lovat observed that his son said his morning prayer, saluted the earth, went away among the trees and, when he came back, bathed in a little mountain stream which ran near, and then completed the Brahmin morning ceremonies of worship. He said to Lovat :

"I shall strive in every way to become a Brahmin,

no matter if it takes me a thousand, thousand years. By this pilgrimage I shall acquire merit. You think so, my father? Yes?"

His face was grave and earnest, his eyes were shining and deep.

"I think so," Lovat replied. He looked at the boy's thin body, thin even with the five-fold garments he was wearing. He said :

"You should stay here now, and wait for me, my son. I will go on alone. It is too cold for you to come. I cannot have your death on my conscience. What would your mother say?"

"I shall not die," said Narayan. He picked up his pilgrim's staff. "Let us set out, my father. As for my mother, perhaps she has made the pilgrimage already, and is up among the mountains before us."

So they bade farewell to the goatherd, and strode away towards the snows. They were still in the region of tigers, and found the tracks of one near a little stream. Lovat was alarmed, but Narayan, who had no fear, laughed and said :

"He is my brother. Let him come. If he eats me, we are still one. Who knows what manner of man he was in a former life on earth?"

They slept, wrapped round and round, and huddled together, in the shelter of three bent trees on the leeward side of the ridge, and ate a little of the food which the goatherd had given them from his store. There were tiger tracks all round the trees in the morning, but the travellers saw and heard nothing all night. That day, as they tramped on, getting now gradually higher, for every valley was little more than the

flattening of an upland before another hill had to be surmounted, Narayan said to his father :

"Did my mother ever tell you the story of how the gods killed their elder brothers ? "

"No," replied Lovat, perceiving where the question was leading.

"Or how the soul passes from body to body, so that truly it may be said that there is no death ? "

"No. Those stories mean nothing to me, Narayan. I do not think as you do."

"Yet you lived with my mother, and of your seed I was born."

"I loved your mother's people, but they have done me nothing but evil."

"My mother did you no evil. And what of all the men who have fed us and given us shelter on this pilgrimage ? "

"There are good men and bad men everywhere, Narayan. Many of the people here are good. Many of my own people are evil. But the two peoples think differently about some things—about death, perhaps, and sin."

Narayan was silent, except that he gave a little sigh :

"Am I wrong to live as the Brahmins do ? Is it a *very* great sin ? "

"Don't ask me," said Lovat. "I don't know."

"Do you know the story of——"

"Let's have no more of your stories. Keep your breath for walking uphill. We are going more slowly than we were."

That night it was clear and cold. They were getting near to the snow-line. At twelve thousand feet,

next day, they were walking in snow, from which the sun glared with a brilliance for which they had had no preparation. The snow was frozen hard, and the walking was crisp and good, but their eyes suffered very much as they tramped along over the pass which formed the next stage of their journey. Another stream next day meant an ice-cold bathe, but they took it, Lovat from choice, Narayan as a religious exercise. The boy was very silent all the rest of the day, and even walked on through a downpour of heavy rain which met them on the other side of the pass, where the way descended again, without speaking a word.

"Are your eyes very bad?" asked Lovat. His own were extremely inflamed.

"I do not mind. I am alarmed, though, because I think I am not a Brahmin, and I remember that there is very bad punishment for presumptuous men like me."

Lovat could not comfort him, and so had nothing to say. They were following a very old road which brought them at last to a village. Here they obtained provisions, and found, to Lovat's amazement, that the people would take their money. They were traders, and understood its value. So Lovat purchased food in quantities, and the two took as much away as they could carry, and two of the hillmen went with them to bear the loads as far as the end of the pass. Here their voluntary porters left them, and they sat and ate some of the food and swallowed snow for drink.

The snow in the narrow pass was deep and soft, and walking was no longer easy. They found a ruined outpost beyond the end of the defile—two or three huts made of wood, long since abandoned, one of

them roofless, one with a wall blown in, the third one habitable. With great thankfulness they prepared to spend the night there. No firewood was handy, and so they slept on the floor, part of which was covered with snow which had blown in, powdery, through the doorway. They found, in the morning, that a gaunt old wolf had crept in there to die, and, without their knowledge, had spent the night with them. Narayan woke first, before it was light, and saw the lambent eyes of the dying beast. He thought it must be a ghost, and shouted in fear, woke Lovat, and, still yelling, hauled him out of the hut. Lovat, grasping his stick which he had seized upon as soon as he was roused, quietened the boy, whom he had never before seen afraid, and peered fearfully into the hut, but at first could see nothing. Their provisions were inside, and he could not bear to abandon them, so the two of them waited outside until the sun shone, and then looked in at the doorway, and could make out the wolf in one corner.

"It is a dog," said Narayan. He was going inside the hut when Lovat pulled him back.

"It is a wolf," he said. "But if you think it a dog, why do you go where it is? I thought the dog was unclean."

"It may be Dharma, the god of duty, who appeared once to Yudhishthira in the likeness of a dog," replied Narayan. He went in to the wolf, and tried to feed it with a bit of dried goat's meat, and stayed with it, warming snow to water in his hands to give it something to drink. He would not leave it. He rubbed his hands with snow to keep the blood circulating, and stayed with the animal all day. Suddenly it got to

its feet, and staggered out of the hut. It ran in circles until it fell to the ground. When he knew it was dead the boy wept.

They stayed in the hut again that night, and next day walked in brilliant sunshine which, even at that high altitude, was much too hot for comfort. They pressed on, cheering one another, whilst the sweat poured down their faces and the way led steeply downhill. Several times they stumbled with exhaustion, and twice Narayan fell and had to be hoisted up again by Lovat. With great courage, however, he kept on. The way was now monotonous in the extreme. There was no danger except the supreme danger of becoming completely exhausted, of falling down in the snow and not being able to rouse themselves to get up again and go on. There seemed to be no air. The contrast of this close and damp-seeming heat after their recent exposure to sharp, dry cold was extreme and trying. They got themselves and one another along somehow—each would have given in but for the presence of the other—and the snow was so deep and thick that walking in it was exceptionally wearying, apart from the atmosphere and the fact that they were already very tired. Several times they lay flat and buried their faces in the soft and slushy snow in an attempt to cool themselves, and the temptation to remain there was intense, and would have resulted in death. At last they came to the deepest part of the valley, where Lovat decided to camp, and, if the weather held, to get a few days' rest.

At the foot of the hills the snow had come to an end, and they were able to camp on dry ground. They

did not remain there longer than the following day and night, however, as Narayan declared that the valley was full of ghosts, that they were all bad, and that he suspected the mountain of being the haunt of demons. He was sure that they had lost the way to the holy mountain, and wanted to turn in their tracks, find a new trail, and try again.

Lovat, however, pushed on up the farther hill-side. Perched on a crag they found a village, a miserable affair of mud huts. The people had several ponies, and gathered round, offering them for sale, but the pilgrims preferred to walk, as they did not know how the animals were to be fed. The people were not only horse-dealers, but ploughed the hard hill-side for crops. The food, however, was poor and the harvests uncertain. Beyond the huts a pass led up and over the hill, and then the trickle of road took the travellers downhill again, and into another valley. This was barren, except for rough grass on the edge of its tiny river. It was very hot in the valley, but when they had climbed the hill on the other side they received a magnificent view of the cloud-clothed mountains. These giants were too steep-sided to be glacial, and were dead-white with frozen snow, blue-shadowed in the rifts, and golden-white and glorious in the sun.

Another village; snug in a little glen, was on the opposite side of the next dark hill, and they liked the people there, and stayed three days. The boy again seemed to Lovat to be flagging, and he thought that they both needed rest. The villagers fed them well, for the glen was green with pasture and bright with alpine flowers.

Their journey continued along a dry and rocky river valley, where the pass led first by the side of the river-bed and then began to mount, still keeping the river-bed in view, but sloping upwards until between the travellers and the river was a precipice bare and steep. The pass then broadened to a width of about nine feet, but they walked in single file, Narayan in front to set the pace so that Lovat knew how fast he wanted to go. By this arrangement, too, he could keep the boy within sight, to see how well he managed the ascent. This, although a little loose underfoot, with stones and bits of rock, was easy enough, and for a time the walking was pleasant. Later, when the sun was strong and shone on the desert-like landscape with summer fierceness, they rested in the shade of a boulder, and then went on again late in the afternoon.

They entered, at the top of the pass, a region of bare hills, close together and gloomy, depressing even by daylight. At the sight of them Narayan checked. He was trembling when Lovat came up.

"I do not go there," he said.

"But there lies our way," said Lovat.

"No," said the boy, "I do not go."

Lovat's mind hardened to a resolve which he had long known he must make. He turned the boy round so that his back was to the hills.

"Very well, Narayan," he said. "We will go back."

"Back by the way we have come?"

"Yes, back to the village. It is better."

"And then?"

"I shall leave you with the headman."

"And come on here alone?"

"I want to know what lies beyond the mountains."

"Do you not want to find my mother?"

"Narayan, she is not there. I have never believed that your mother made the pilgrimage to the mountains. It was never my wish that you should come."

To his surprise the boy did not argue. He led the way again, downhill this time, to the dry river-bed and up the hill-side beyond and so over the crest and down to the tucked-away, pleasant, comfortable, kindly little village in the valley.

The villagers were not surprised to see them again. Although Lovat could not understand their northern speech, so much was obvious, and he spent two hours in conveying to the headman the information that his son would remain in the village but that he himself would go on. Narayan wept at the thought of parting with him. Lovat comforted him, and he fell asleep at last, but Lovat could hear him moaning in his sleep, as though he were overcome with misery. In the morning it was clear that he was ill, and Lovat did not know what to do for him. He understood now why the boy had been so docile in coming back to the village. He had a bluish look which frightened Lovat to see, and his thin hands looked so fragile that Lovat took them in his own, and held them as though he were holding Narayan's life and refusing to give it up to death.

During the day the boy breathed with very great difficulty. His eyelids looked transparent. During part of the time he was unconscious, and in the night delirium began. He talked about his mother and endlessly repeated her name, and mixed up with it the names of Shiva, and then knew that he did, and

cried piteously to the god to help him remember all his names.

The fever ran high. Lovat heaped coverings upon him, and held them about him when he tried to throw them off. He took off his own outer garments and spread them over the boy. Next day the villagers gathered about the mud hut, and sent in a boiling-hot concoction of witchcraft-smelling liquid which Lovat administered, drop by drop, to his son. The boy slept without delirium afterwards, and gradually the fever left him. He was weak, but he picked up strength fairly quickly. At the end of a week he said he was fit to go on. At the end of a fortnight Lovat thought it was safe to let him try.

The villagers decided to go with them part of the way, and took them into the nest of hills which Narayan had dreaded, and then out beyond them to a valley where flowed a wide, shallow river. Another village provided a ferry here—inflated buffalo hides which formed a kind of raft, and which the ferryman propelled with an oar like the trunk of a tree. It might be truer to say, thought Lovat, the trunk of a tree like an oar. They got across slowly but safely, and then began the ascent on the other side.

Lovat took things easily, to let the boy find his legs. They had brought away food from the village to add to their store of sun-dried provisions, and Lovat was fully loaded. From the top of the next rise they had another wonderful view of the mountains. One peak in particular, towering like cloud to the sky (which was perfectly clear bright blue), was so extraordinarily beautiful that Narayan, halting, shaded his eyes and gazed at it, prayed aloud, and then said :

"That is where God dwells. Take me there, my father. Let us go directly, the shortest way from here."

There proved not to be a short way so far as they could tell. The way was long, and difficult and dangerous. Lovat, afraid of exposure for the boy, had not had the heart to insist upon his staying in the village. He thought, too, that even if he left his son behind the boy would give the villagers the slip, and set out alone and follow him. So, with very great misgivings but not knowing what else to do, he took him along again, travelling as slowly as was safe, and hoping that all would be well.

On they went, and came in the evening to a hill village which lay at the foot of the next descent. This up-hill and down-dale progress was curiously frustrating and nerve-trying. No sooner did they come within sight of the great white mountains than another hill, brown and bare, would have to be crossed, another long valley traversed, another swift river forded, and, while they were negotiating obstacles such as these they lost sight of the object of their quest.

The hill-tribe who inhabited the village were wild, shy people who seemed indisposed at first to offer the travellers shelter. It was raining, and Lovat was anxious to have a hut for the night and a chance to dry their wet clothes. One man, who had been to Benares, could speak a little Hindi, and was thrust forward by the others to act as interpreter. To him Lovat said :

"We are pilgrims . . ."

But Narayan put him aside, and addressed the headman.

"There was once a great king named Vishvamitra, who came to the Himalayas to worship Shiv."

The interpreter quickly translated. In a few minutes the pilgrims were seated in the largest hut in the place, which was crowded also with listeners, the interpreter translating, intelligently on the whole, but in a hit or miss fashion and in a continual shout as Narayan unfolded the story.

Women took away the garments of the travellers and dried them by fires lighted on the threshold of the huts to be out of the way of the rain, and Lovat and Narayan, when the story was finished, slept soundly for hours under sheepskins. These had been huddled upon them by the people, who were anxious to hear more stories on the morrow.

They stayed there nearly a week, feasting on curds and goat's-milk, wheat-cakes and butter, and every day Narayan told stories to all who came to listen. The villagers, simple as children, would squat patiently down before the door of the hut, remain silent whilst Narayan slept, and when he appeared, a thin-faced, large-eyed boy with the magic gift of words and a fund of stories which seemed to the villagers as inexhaustible as the lives of the gods themselves, they hailed him with shouts and chattering, some calling out the names of the stories they had liked best, others demanding a new one, another new one, and Narayan would smile, and beckon them to sit down. He told them stories about their own Himalayas—the story of how the Ganges fell upon Shiva's head, of how heavily she fell, and of how the god, to punish her for discourtesy and bad temper, caused her waters to wander for years through his thick, long hair.

"And we," he concluded triumphantly, "we are now bound for the highest mountains from whence Mother Ganges fell."

"But that is from heaven," said a man. Narayan regarded him fixedly and replied :

"True, it is from heaven. And to heaven, my brothers and fathers, we are all bound."

Then he told them the Hindu story of the Ark, and of how it came aground on a Himalayan mountain, and of how fish cared for the survivors, and of how the Fish which spoke to them was Brahma, lord of creation. And last of all he told them of the five reigning princes of the dynasty of the moon, cousins to Krishna himself, who resolved to set out on the last great journey of all, the way to heaven.

"The way *you* go?" said one of the men, open-mouthed throughout the story.

"The way *we* go," answered Narayan.

"The way my father has gone," said a voice from the outskirts, weeping.

The old man had died in the very early morning, but because the village wanted to hear the stories, and because there was not the same dreadful necessity in the northern hills as there was in the southern plains to get rid of the body quickly, the son had not troubled to mention it until the stories were done. As soon as they knew that their neighbour's father was dead, the villagers dispersed to prepare for the rites of funeral.

The body, that of a man of sixty years, as nearly as Lovat could tell, was carried out of the hut and laid on the ground. Then the relatives hacked it in pieces. These pieces were then collected and were made into

a large, untidy bundle which was placed on a kind of litter. This was carried to the place where it was to be burnt, and the procession which surrounded and followed it was composed largely of people playing musical instruments. Lovat and Narayan followed the *cortège* out to the burning-ground at the edge of a lake, and every family in the village brought fire for the funeral pyre.

(2)

After the long rest and the good food, Lovat and his son resumed their journey with renewed resolution and cheerfulness. Narayan was convinced that they were going to find Parbati, and Lovat began to find that the long, severe pilgrimage was dulling the feeling of restlessness he had had since the death of his mother. The pilgrims walked more easily now, for the villagers had given them shoes—plaited straw sandals, wide-soled, which gave their hardened feet no discomfort and were equally good on rocky ground or on snow. They had given them spare pairs, too, and had made them up biggish packs of food. None of the villagers was anxious for them to go, and Narayan had to promise that, if they returned that way, he would tell them some more of his stories. The interpreter accompanied them up the ascent, and so did three or four girls who had taken a lively fancy to Narayan and did not want him to leave them. It was not the first indication to Lovat that his son was of marriageable age, and the thought brought sadness with it.

The girls, still shouting and waving, soon fell behind ; the interpreter eased the pack he was carrying for

Narayan, and halted, and said good-bye. He stood wistfully eyeing them, though, in such a manner that Lovat felt compelled to offer him money, although he did not believe for a moment that any thought of money was in the man's mind. It was not easy to believe, in fact, that the villagers understood the use of money. In any case, he did not believe they would take it from him and the boy whom they so goodheartedly had befriended.

The man turned the coins over curiously. Then he pushed Lovat's hand gently away, and still looked beseechingly at Narayan.

"If you could teach me one story the people have not heard, everybody would love me," he said with pathetic charm. So they sat upon a boulder and Narayan told him, two or three times, very patiently and slowly, in Hindi, the story of the Brahmin who gave all his cows to the priests, and who gave his son to death whilst death was absent from his kingdom, and of the three boons death was constrained to give the youth because he had not been there to offer his hospitality to a Brahmin.

The interpreter was delighted.

"This story," said he, "is one which we shall talk about, over and over again, for this story has no ending, neither can any man give it an ending, for, as it tells us, the soul can never die."

Well pleased, he left them. They watched him get smaller and smaller as he reached the box-like habitations far away down in the valley. Then they took their way along a narrow path between a great hill and a precipice—treacherous walking, for pebbles slid from underneath their feet, and several times

they came to a break in the path, and, heart in mouth, had to scramble over the gap at risk of death.

The greatest trouble after that was lack of water. There was not a drop to be had, and their mouths became parched and their tongues swollen and dry. At last, after more than ten hours' dreadful walking, the path dropped at nightfall into a valley through which there ran a river. They drank and bathed. The weather had been very hot, but now, with night at hand, the air was cool. It was very quiet in the valley. Even the river did not make the usual rushing noise of a mountain stream. There was no village there, either; Narayan was nervous, and Lovat himself felt far from comfortable, for the place was decidedly eerie. He knew, however, that they could not continue their journey until the morning, and so they lay down to sleep on the bank of the river, but not near the animals' drinking place. They could see the trampled ground and the hoof-prints of deer.

The wild creatures had had their evening drink before the travellers came, and although Lovat stayed awake for nearly the whole of the night for fear of dangerous beasts, nothing disturbing happened, and at dawn they bathed again and Narayan performed his worship, and then, with the dark hills shutting them in like walls, they took up the food they had not eaten, drank deeply, filled a skin bottle Lovat had, and off they started once more.

They were richly rewarded by the accomplishment of the next stage of their journey. The road came out upon a glorious plateau from which they could see great forests, tumbling streams, blue sky with white clouds over mountains, tillage and pasturage, and the

snow-peaks once again, their tops now hidden in cloud, but their gleaming sides still brilliant, shining golden-white beneath the sun. They sat and rested an hour or more, and gazed on the beautiful scene. It was obvious that they had reached the end of the preliminary stage of their journey. There were no more foothills. After they had left the green valley and had climbed the forested belt, they would be on the slope of the mountains.

"Let us go down to the valley. I can see a village," said Lovat. So when they were rested they descended, and found the largest village which, so far, they had seen among the hills. The work in the fields and the herding of animals was all being done by women. These stopped work to stare at the strangers, and then drew near and clustered round, uncouth as their own draught-animals and as obstinately immovable. They were filled with curiosity; touched Narayan's cheek and Lovat's hands, pulled at the travellers' sleeves, giggled, made jesting and probably lewd remarks, and would not let them pass until Lovat strenuously but not roughly shoved them out of the way. They were people of short, broad stature, with the fair skins of the north, black eyes and flat semi-Mongolian faces. Even at work in the fields every one of the women wore numbers of silver ornaments—bracelets, anklets, nose-rings and ear-rings chiefly. They were crude but cheerful people. Lovat and Narayan could hear them singing at their labour long after they had pushed a way through the fascinated group, and were heading for the huts beyond the fields.

Chapter Eighteen

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(I)

THE MEN OF THE VILLAGE WERE TRADERS, CHIEFLY IN ponies. Because of this, although they were strangely primitive, especially in religious ideas, they, unlike their women, were not unaccustomed to strangers, and were prepared to welcome Lovat and Narayan, even when they discovered that the pilgrims did not want mounts. One of them almost immediately offered them shelter in his hut, but they were glad to emerge again, for it stank of stale food—bad meat and fermented drink—and was almost alive with fleas. It was all very dirty and unpleasant.

When they came out again—and they did this as soon as they could do so without offending their host—they found all kinds of games in progress, apparently in their honour. Women and men together joined freely in the games, and nobody seemed to be married, although all the men and women seemed to be friendly.

There was wild dancing later, and then the villagers went to their huts for the night. Charms were pronounced against ghosts and demons, and Lovat and Narayan, who preferred to sleep on the ground wrapped up in their mountaineering clothes rather than face the smells and the fleas in the huts, were regarded with awe by the villagers. These were not all of the same caste, it appeared, but in this case the castes seemed only to exist in order to carry on feuds. Lovat and

Narayan stayed in the valley four days, and obtained a surprising amount of information about the villagers.

One reason for this was the lack of reticence on all hands regarding village affairs, beliefs and enmities. The women were particularly attentive to Lovat, and one or two proposed marriage to him in words which, although he did not understand them literally, left not the slightest doubt of their import and meaning. Narayan, to his surprise, was almost entirely ignored, but this was natural in a community which fixed the marrying age of its women at about twenty to twenty-five.

On the night before the pilgrims were due to leave, a village dance was held. This was a merry, noisy, somewhat licentious affair, and the people feasted and drank as well as danced, marriages were arranged—they were love-matches, Lovat decided—and the women sang love-songs, some of them dancing to the music, others sitting beside their chosen men and smoking opium with them, and signing away the approach of devils with their fingers. The village was rife with superstition, and Lovat, gazing about him at the dark masses of the hills which enclosed the settlement, thought he could understand why. The valley seemed haunted; the dancing people puppets of the devils they feared and worshipped. He was not at all sorry when the last morning came, and they left the village and climbed the northern hill. Two things only they had purchased—two blankets made by the villagers. They were dirty and verminous, but after they had laid them out on rocks and beaten and shaken out the fleas, they thought that it would be well worth all the trouble of carrying them on their journey,

although they weighed about a quarter of a hundred-weight each.

Their progress was now very slow, owing to the weight of their equipment, for they had been presented with food and had taken some of the fresh water from the stream which flowed through the valley. Before them rose the mountains, and progress was steadily upward. The way was not dangerous yet, but heavy walking began as soon as they reached the snow.

They camped, the first night, in hard and broken snow. It had half melted and then frozen up again. They managed to dig a hole, about four feet across, to give them shelter from the wind, and they rigged up a tent across it with one of the blankets and their staves. It was better than nothing, they thought. They kept each other warm, both wrapped in the second blanket, and slept well, waking at dawn. They ate wheat-bread, and some curried lentils which the villagers had given them, and were very soon ready to go on.

They passed, on their climb, a giant birch tree, a massive-trunked landmark leaning bravely out, from the cliff on which it grew, over the path they trod. There was now no semblance of a road. They secured their packages round their waists and by a broad band round their woollen-covered turbans. This was a method of portorage (recommended by the villagers) of which they soon found the advantage. They picked the smoothest walking over the snow Narayan still in the lead and Lovat closely following. The snow was hard, the sunshine brilliant; and the morning sun cast shadows thirty feet long. Their own shadows

lengthened because of the slope of the snow, as it fell away down a gentle incline towards some broken, floe-like, frozen snow away to the right. Before them rose the peaks of the craggy mountains, shifting and altering, it seemed, at every mile of the way.

The going was fairly easy, compared with what they thought they would meet later on, and they made the best of a fine, sharp, pleasant day. Lovat felt no cold ; he wondered whether Narayan did, but decided he would not ask him until the evening.

They lay under a mountain crag that night, each wrapped in his separate blanket. The blankets were thick—so very thick—waterproof, too, for the oil had been left in the wool—that the warmth of their bodies did not melt the snow on which they lay. A hundred times they were grateful for the blankets.

They set out at dawn again, tramped on over hard snow against which they kept closing their eyes because of the blinding light in the risen sun, and then, about midday, they started their steepest bit of climbing. The snow was deep and soft, and had drifted treacherously as though to fill up holes. They mounted a very high cliff, worked round its overhanging top, found icicles, several feet long, pendant from the lip of the cliff, and came out, after arduous work, on to a snow-bridge spanning a deep ravine. Narayan walked across it without a thought ; Lovat felt nausea at the idea of crossing it, but the boy was waiting on the farther side for him, and the bridge, underhung with icicles the thickness of tree-roots, was a yard or so wide. He looked at the boy, and crossed without lowering his eyes.

In the evening they made their camp where they

seemed to be under the very peak of the mountain. It did not seem possible that any more than one day's climbing lay before them. They built a wall of snow against the wind, and lay in their blankets fairly snug again. The sun was setting as they accomplished this bit of work, and behind the mountains rose banks of rosy cloud with the greenish blue sky behind them and all the snow on the mountains stained deep pink except in the darkest hollows, which had turned purple. The calm and the majesty of the evening were past description. Narayan said, as the light faded and day at last withdrew, surrendering its magnificence and its glory :

“Now we are in Shiv's country.”

In those high altitudes neither of them felt any fear. Every night they slept easily and well. Each day they journeyed through what seemed enchanted land. The snow lay in drifts and undulating banks, untouched until they walked on it, and from the cliffs under which they were moving hung icicles like thick-stemmed, living creeper. They felt dwarfed and negligible on such a landscape. Before them rose hills of snow which might have seemed impressive but for the towering peaks in front—the peaks which were their goal—and the tremendous wall of mountain-face which rose to the left of them, and then before them, as they followed the easiest track up a shoulder of cliff, and crawled on hands and knees in snow-drifts round a crag.

Three hours of such work exhausted them, and at midday, having made very little progress, they bivouacked by the side of a broken glacier, and ate snow because they were hot and very thirsty. The

glacier reflected back the sun's short, sharp rays with an indescribable glitter, so they turned their backs on it, and, after a frugal meal, they lay and slept. Great towers of snow and ice rose on either hand during the next part of their journey, and the air was so enervating that it needed all their will-power to push on, especially as they still travelled very slowly, and the great peaks approached no nearer, for all their struggles.

At last they reached level ground, and although it was not yet sunset they made up their minds to camp. They had been walking knee-deep and sometimes thigh-deep in snow during the past two hours, and Lovat, watching his son, had wondered several times whether his strength would last, and allow him to reach the summit of the last, long, upward climb. Narayan's Indian blood perhaps might have given in, but his English blood gave him sufficient stamina to finish. The altitude they had gained was now considerable, and breathing was not as easy as they had found it lower down. The air on the high mountain slopes was very thin, and they found that they soon became giddy.

The sight of the peaks from the camp was extremely heartening. By the last short stage of their journey they seemed to have gained tremendously. Narayan, however, had flung himself down exhausted, and it needed all that remained of Lovat's own physical strength to wrap him up in his blanket before he fell asleep in the snow.

In the morning they looked out from the edge of their plateau as though they were looking from heaven on to the world. Far below, among pine trees and pasture, they could see a shining glacier. It looked

as though a falling torrent had obeyed the command to be still. Sunshine filled every hollow, and they could see the way they had come, and could even pick out, for a distance, the line of their own dark footprints in the snow.

Then mist rolled over them on a strong south wind. It dropped, and left them befogged. So they camped again, well knowing that they could not move again before it lifted. When they did go on, they crossed a ridge of snow, and again caught sight of the topmost peaks which the ridge for a time had hidden from their view. It was then that Lovat saw footprints, and knew that they were no longer alone in that brilliant world of the snow.

They followed the footsteps to the face of a very steep cliff. Steps hacked in it gave them hand and foothold, however, and, Narayan leading, they climbed up the steep, hard face. It was scrambling, difficult work, and Lovat watched very carefully for fear that his son should slip and come crashing down. But Narayan, boylike, climbed like a cat, and made not a single false step, and at the top disappeared in the mouth of a cave. Lovat followed him, and fell on him, for the cave had a steep step down, and both of them stumbled and tumbled. They got up and stood there, breathing heavily in the darkness, and trying to get their eyes accustomed to the gloom.

For a few moments they could see and hear nothing, but the darkness inside the aperture was relative only, and when their eyes grew accustomed to the very dim light after the brightness outside, they could see a man seated opposite them at a distance of ten or twelve paces. He was naked, but had pulled about him the

tiger skin on which he was seated. He was sitting in the yoga attitude called Padmasan, and was contemplating his visitors calmly and benignly, without fear. Lovat begged his pardon for their intrusion, but the boy Narayan flung himself prostrate upon his face in front of the holy man, and cried in Bengali : " Bless me ! Bless me, dear master, bless me ! "

The Mahatma smiled, and spoke to him affectionately in Bengali. Then he told him to rise, and to be seated. To Lovat he spoke in English, bidding him welcome. He spread out the tiger skin, and, with a gesture, invited them to sit with him upon it.

He was a fine and noble-looking man, pale as a European, with bronze-brown hair and beard. They could not see him clearly, however, until he lighted a small lamp and set it in front of him. It lighted their faces and his. In marked contrast to most of the Hindu ascetics Lovat had seen in the plains, this Mahatma was scrupulously clean, and the only odour in the cave, before the lamp was lighted, was a slight and pleasant smell rather like that of butter, and, in any case, scarcely noticeable. For some time after his first greeting, the holy man was silent, and Lovat did not like to interrupt his meditations. At the end of half an hour or so, he spoke.

" I have watched you since you left Delhi."

A groan of amazement and reverence from Narayan was the only outward response of the travellers to this extraordinary and incredible statement.

" Your quest is ended. Your loved woman is not among the mountains," the sage continued. " She returned to her own people, and has cut off her hair, and is slave to her husband's relatives. But she plans

to make pilgrimage to Puri, because she is not at peace."

"My mother," moaned Narayan. Laying his head against the Mahatma's breast, he began to weep and to wail.

"I must go back and find her," said Lovat in English.

The Mahatma embraced Narayan. "And you, my darling," he said to him in Bengali, "what will you do? Will you go back with your father?"

"You know what I shall do," the boy replied.

They remained in the cave for a week. Every morning Narayan went out with a wooden bowl and gathered snow, and brought it into the cave. When it melted he and the Mahatma drank. For Lovat there was bread and butter, and some kind of fermented liquor. He tried to persuade Narayan to eat, but the boy would touch nothing but the water.

When the end of the week had come, Lovat decided to return, but the boy did not want to leave the cave.

"I am happy here. This is my home," he said. To Lovat's awe and astonishment, Narayan was looking a great deal better than he had done since the fever left him. He had put on flesh; his cheeks curved roundly instead of being sharp-boned and thin. His whole body was in better condition; his skin was smooth and looked healthy, his eyes were bright, and his mouth was eager and smiling.

The Mahatma smiled at his words, touched his forehead lovingly and said:

"You are not yet old enough. Return to Bengal with your father. Later I will send for you, and you shall come to me here."

The boy pleaded ardently to stay, but, to Lovat's

relief, the Mahatma repeated his command, and at last they took their leave of the holy man. As they went away over the snow they both looked back, but the mouth of the cave was hidden. Nothing was left to show that the encounter with the Mahatma had taken place, except for the footprints in the snow.

(2)

But now their troubles commenced, and dogged them for days. They began well by being able to follow their own tracks back across the crisp snow ; but towards the end of the second day they came to where a slide of snow and ice several hundred yards across had slithered down a hill-side. It not only obliterated the tracks, but had altered the appearance of the landscape. After casting about in a vain attempt to find the way, they found themselves in deep powdery snow half-way up a cliff which was cut into by ravines. Snow-clouds hung over it as heavily as the threat of thunder would hang on the fields in the south.

Lovat was at a loss. Narayan, who found the deep snow difficult to negotiate, was extremely tired, and Lovat did not think he could manage much more that day. He himself therefore proposed to climb the cliff by what looked to be the easiest route, and survey the landscape from the summit to find out whether he could recognise any features which might help them to find their way back.

Narayan did not want to be left. Lovat knew that, although the boy did not say so ; but he was obviously at the limit of his strength, and Lovat left him with both blankets and the packs, and then set out alone on his dangerous climb.

It was late afternoon, but the sun had not begun to set. The sky was very heavy, and a brooding, depressingly anxious feeling seemed to hang over everything. The way he had to take had appeared deceptively easy from below, but he soon found that it was longer and more arduous than he had imagined.

There was a long deep cleft to work round before he could begin to mount, and after that there was a bare rock-face so steep that no snow could cling to it. He had to go back for nearly half the distance he had covered, work round an overhanging shoulder, and then, bent nearly double because of the steepness of the gradient, climb a long slope to the edge of the second ravine. That also he had to work round, and did so for part of the time on a ledge where a slip on the frozen snow might mean death. Except that, once embarked, it was more dangerous and difficult to go back than to go on (he dared not risk turning round, and would have been obliged to crawl backwards to safety), he would have given up the venture.

From the next safe eminence he looked for Narayan, and could see him, small and black on the blue-white snow. The third ravine took him downhill first, very steeply, before he could travel round it, but once on the up-slope again it was easy going, except that, he was tired. From the top, however, he saw nothing but a vast, bewildering landscape of snow and mountain. He could recognise no salient point at all.

He began to feel panic. Death, out there on the mountains and in the cold, wore a dreadful look. He made his way back to his son, retracing by the trail of his footprints, which stood out like ink-blots on paper, the way by which he had come. The precipice-

path turned his stomach, but he knew that it was fatal to wait and try to collect himself, so with the thought of the lonely boy to uphold him, he gathered courage, steadied his nerves, and cautiously groped his way along. Once he felt his foot slip. At the same instant, for no reason that he knew, his mind flew to the Mahatma whom they had visited in the high cave, and, as he thought of him, he felt as though a strong hand gripped his garments at the waist, and stayed the plunge to death. With his pulses pounding and a horrible singing in his ears, he safely accomplished the rest of the journey. Narayan staggered to meet him, and flung himself into his arms.

"I felt you fall ! I felt you fall !" he said.

Their resting-place was horribly exposed. Lovat almost wrapped himself round the boy in an effort to keep him warm, but by morning both were chilled through, and Lovat's frost-bitten fingers would scarcely allow him to portion out the food. Their plight was a bad one, but Lovat remained cheerful for the sake of Narayan, whom he was determined to get safely back to the south. They set off as soon as they had eaten, and on the march the sun at first warmed them and then grew oppressively hot in the long descent to the valley. The great temptation, when they were hot and parched, was to keep on eating snow.

The going became a little easier on the uphill climb which followed, but this was soon counteracted by the steepness of the slope. Narayan began to lag, and Lovat to cheer him, but when evening came and they made camp under an ice-boulder sixty or seventy feet high, Narayan was flushed and feverish. He coughed a good deal, and seemed to breathe with difficulty,

and the rarefied atmosphere did not help him. Lovat was anxious, and wished, for the fortieth time, that he had never allowed the boy to accompany him on the pilgrimage ; that he had sent him back when he had the chance, and had not yielded to his pleading and to the temptation of having his sweet companionship. He lay awake all night and watched the stars, and listened to Narayan's difficult breathing. He was thinking of one thing and another, chiefly of his life in India, of his dead mother, of his wife in slavery to her people, of his son, who, he thought, was dying.

When morning came the boy was very bad. Lovat did not know the best thing to do, and dared not heap on him all the clothing and bedding lest he himself perish of cold when the boy had most need of his help. He was entirely selfless on this score, caring nothing for his own life, thinking only of the child, and of what was the best thing to do. In the end he decided that, ill as Narayan was, and dangerous though it was, he felt sure, to move him, it was necessary that he should be taken to a far more sheltered place.

He took him up and, staggering along, began to carry him down the slope towards the valley. His own feet were frost-bitten, and he was wearing his second pair of straw sandals. Fortunately they were very broad, and he suffered as little discomfort, probably, in them, as he could have done in any kind of shoe, however pliable, but the pain was intense, all the same.

The boy was not very heavy, but to carry him taxed Lovat's remaining strength. He held on with a courage he had not known he possessed, and, often plunging and staggering until he thought he should lose his

footing and fling both of them head foremost into the snow, at last he gained the lee of a rounded hump just as a hailstorm came on.

The new camping-place was not much better than the old, but afforded a little shelter against the driving hail which flailed the boulders and cut black holes in the snow. It lashed upon the wind like the spiteful fury of small but belligerent demons, but Lovat laid the boy down, and soon had him rolled in the blankets. His cough seemed worse, and he moaned and asked for water. Lovat gave him a little snow to suck, but dared not give him much for fear of the ill-effects.

The hail changed to rain later on, and Lovat tried to persuade himself that the atmosphere was warmer. Somehow the night passed. He did not sleep. His feet were very painful, and he was cold, but did not take any coverings off the boy.

At dawn he had made up his mind to push on, although it meant carrying the boy. Narayan, however, seemed easier, and with every downward step his breathing improved; he coughed less frequently, did not moan or sigh, and part of the time, in spite of their jolting progress, he must have slept. The rain had ceased, but the snow was soft, and walking was very difficult. Lovat took frequent rests, setting the boy down every time as gently as he could, but he had to heave him up jerkily to get him across his shoulders again, whenever they started off after one of these pauses.

At last, towards the middle of the afternoon, they came to the edge of the gently sloping snow plateau. Across it Lovat, carrying his son, had travelled not more than four miles in upwards of seven hours.

Before him stretched a long, steep, snow-covered slope, but half-way down it he could see a small, dark object which might have been a hut. Unable to believe that this could be so, Lovat, nevertheless, with Narayan on his back, plunged onward hopefully towards it. The sun was now very hot. Sweat ran into his eyes, and his whole body seemed in a stew of lather. He would not stop, but struggled on. The hut, however, proved to be nothing but a curious piece of cliff-face on which the snow had melted in the strong warmth of the sun. Nevertheless, the disappointment of finding no human habitation was tempered by the fact that at the side of the cliff was a hole—not more than a sizable split in the dark rock, but big enough for an animal's lair or perhaps to shelter a man.

He laid Narayan on the snow with a fold of his turban over his face to protect him from the glare of the sun, grasped his staff firmly—for he had contrived to retain his stick as well as to carry the boy—and cautiously tried the opening. Nothing was inside but air, so he carried Narayan up to the entrance and carefully manœuvred him inside. With care he himself could also get in. He collected some handfuls of snow in a small wooden bowl which the holy man had given Narayan when they parted, and set it to melt in the sun. Then he wrapped the boy up again, gave him the water from the snow as soon as it was ready, and then lay down beside him and slept for hours and hours.

He had not intended to sleep, but warmth, utter physical weariness, and a feeling of safety which the knowledge of a roof overhead and a shelter out of the snow had given to him (although he had not thought

about it) caused his mind to relax, and the sleep replenished his strength.

Narayan had his eyes open. He smiled at Lovat. He said :

“ Are we at home ? ”

“ Not yet,” Lovat answered. “ Are you well ? ”

But it was obvious that he was well, although he was very weak and could not sit up when he tried. Lovat gave him some food, but the boy could not eat it. He said :

“ Give me water. I will live upon water as I did when we sat at the feet of the Mahatma in the mountains.”

So he had nothing but water for three days, and at the end of that time they ate, between them, all that remained of the food.

When the food was finished, Lovat realised that, if Narayan could manage to walk, even if very slowly, they ought to press on. The boy was weak, but remarkably cheerful and brave. He walked about a quarter of a mile, then Lovat carried him on his back, then he walked again. In this way, although they made very slow progress, they managed to cover a few miles during the day, and at night lay down in the snow. The daylight hours were hot, but the night was excessively cold. It was trying to Lovat to remain awake during the night and get up every half-hour or so and shake the fallen snow from himself and scrape it off his son's blanket, but it had to be done, for snow fell incessantly all that night and most of the following day. They kept their hands tucked away as much as they could, for the snow soon froze on them. It was appallingly cold that day, and Lovat was in deadly fear that

Narayan would not be able to fight it, ill as he had been. The next night both of them slept, for Lovat's will-power was atrophied by exhaustion, and sleep was absolutely necessary to him. In the morning both of them were coated in ice.

The next day the sun shone again, and Narayan (against all reason, Lovat thought) seemed a good deal stronger, and was better able to walk. He said :

"I know that the Mahatma of the mountains is thinking of us, and his will is helping mine."

At the foot of the slope the hot weather struck them like a sandstorm. It seemed impossible that such extremes of climate could be met with on so comparatively short a march. The sun blazed down, and soon they came to fresh water and a village. The people fed them, and listened to Narayan with pleasure, when, in a voice still weak from his illness, he told them about the cave of the Mahatma.

After the village came a steep and rocky path strewn over with pebbles, a pass between two high hills. But at the end of it they could turn and look northwards again, and see the mountains.

"Why did we come back?" said Narayan, gazing, with Lovat, at the peaks of shining snow. They went on again, and forded a shallow river in a valley. Lovat stooped and touched the ice-cold water, then carried his son across. On the farther side they drank, and ate some of the food which the people of the village had given them.

"Is it like this in your country, my father?" asked Narayan. Lovat, with a quick frown of recollection, paused before he answered.

"The people are not so good-hearted. They are

not as kind," he said. He was amazed and grateful when he realised how good the people had been to them on their pilgrimage. Narayan was less impressed.

"We are *good* men," he said, with finality. That night they slept on hot sand, and in the morning climbed another hill. But the worst of their journey was over. They were back again among the villages. True, the villages were often miles apart ; separated by deep ravines and rushing, torrential streams ; hidden from each other by hills ; tucked away behind waterfalls or in the crannies of cliffs. But the great fact remained that they were there. Lovat was glad to feel that again he was among men ; some savage, some ignorant, some cruel, but all of them human, reasoning, hospitable, after their fashion.

Farther on they came to a lake. The sand of its shores was hot, and about it dozens of hares were playing. Lovat flung his staff to knock one down for food, but Narayan deflected it with his hand, hurting his wrist, and then caught Lovat's arm with his uninjured hand and begged him to spare the little animals.

There were wild birds, too, on the water and flying over it. The lake was very large. Its waters were beautifully clear, and at a little distance from where they stood was a Shivite temple. They approached it, and Narayan worshipped. When he came back to where Lovat was standing, he said :

"I have talked with the Mahatma again. He is very kind, and speaks to me often since my illness."

Lovat nodded, accepting the statement, and they seated themselves by the lake and looked at the rippling water and the silver-white, red-beaked birds.

"Is this the sacred lake by which King Vishvamitra

spent a thousand years?" asked Narayan, after a silence.

"And was tempted by the nymph Menaka who came from heaven and sported in the waters?" said Lovat, laughing. It was one of Parbati's favourite stories, he remembered. His son looked suspiciously at him.

"In the end he was made a Brahmin for his austerities," he said gently but conclusively.

The sun began to set, and the mountains, which were reflected in the water and which seemed to be very near although they were many days' journey behind the travellers, were rose-coloured and then chilled to blue. The moon rose and the stars came out. It was peaceful and very beautiful by the water. They lay and watched the sky for a very long time, not feeling the need of sleep and grateful for their freedom at last from snow. But they found the weather cold, and the water of the lake was icy. Lovat would not let Narayan bathe.

"But," said he, "I cannot perform my worship until I have bathed."

"Do not perform your worship, then," said Lovat, and held on to him to prevent his dashing straightway into the water. "You must obey me," he added. "I have brought you away from death."

Narayan, with the sweet obedience which still seemed to Lovat's English mind a strange and disappointing quality, bowed his head and promised. As they had plenty of food they rested beside the lake for another whole day and night, and then resumed their journey.

At nightfall, after a day of rocky defiles and a pass by a dangerous precipice, they forded a shallow river

and found themselves again on pasture land. They had milk, wheat bread, curried lentils and good straw beds that night in the hill-village perched on a plateau. Below the plateau hung a valley caught up between two dark hills. Lovat slept as soon as he lay on his bed. Narayan, in his sleep, tossed about uneasily, muttered, and once cried out and woke Lovat, who started up, aware, instinctively, of danger. He rolled off the bed with a shout, and a hand, which was groping round the doorway of their hut, was withdrawn. The moon flashed suddenly greenish on a knife. There was a sound of light footfalls, running. In the morning Narayan knew nothing of what had happened, but Lovat took hasty leave of the village, and left it at a good swift pace with backward glances over his shoulder and his staff clutched tightly in his hand. He still had a good deal of money, but could not think that anybody in the village would have known that fact or cared very much about it.

It was after they had left the village two hours or more behind them, that he knew for certain that they were being followed. He quickened the pace, although Narayan was sweating. Suddenly he drew the boy aside where a cliff beetled over the roadway they were now following. There was a very large old tree at the bend of the road. They hid themselves behind it. Lovat shortened his staff to use it as a club, then changed his mind, for although the staff was tough it was not very heavy. The pursuers were making good time along the narrow little path above the precipice. Suddenly he thrust out his staff. . . . The bodies bounded from rock to rock like balls. They watched them, horrified.

“ They would have killed us,” said Lovat ; but his knees were shaking. He waited, gripping Narayan, for at least a quarter of an hour, but neither of the robbers stirred, and the travellers hurried on again. The incident had been ugly. There was nothing that Lovat wanted now except to get back to Delhi.

Chapter Nineteen

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(1)

DELHI WAS FULL OF AFGHANS. THEY SWAGGERED ALONG the narrow streets and blocked the passage of the Indians, spitting upon the meek and drawing their great curved swords upon anyone who sought to oppose them. The gossip of the bazaars was all to the same effect : that the Emperor was in the hands of his foreign courtiers ; that Afghans, Persians, Arabs, Turks, and even full-blooded negroes had his ear ; and that his own Indian-born Moslems and the great Hindu landowners could do nothing against the strangers.

The noise and dirt of the bazaars, the broken houses in the quarter outside the gates where beggars and low-class street vendors and uncaught criminals lived ; the grille-windowed handsome dwellings of the wealthier Moslems in the city, the sense of uneasiness abroad, and the jostling crowds in the narrow thoroughfares gave Lovat a feeling that nothing about him was real. Narayan said, a dozen times a day :

“ Let us go. Let us leave this place. I do not like it.”

But Lovat had his plans, and they included another audience with the Emperor, this time without his English companions. He wanted to go back to the Company's agents at Calcutta with the last trading

treaty ratified, and with several important concessions. The Marathas were rising again ; that was also common news in the bazaars ; and Lovat thought he might use the fact to bring pressure on the Emperor. The new rising was not a fight for Hinduism, as the wars of Shivaji had been, but was led by chieftains anxious for spoil and prepared to levy tribute wherever they conquered. The Hindu rulers of the north were also restive. The Mogul empire was falling apart and Farrukh-Siyar was not the man to attempt to put it together.

Among Lovat's plans were those for Narayan. Anglo-Indians, sons of English factors by Indian mothers, had proved good servants to the Company, and Lovat was determined to get for Narayan what other men's now unrecognised but native-born sons had had. He proposed this course to the boy, and found Narayan willing. He said :

" But I must marry. You will arrange my marriage, my father, before you leave me."

" I shall not leave you," said Lovat. The boy looked at him in surprise.

" But you *will* leave me," he said. " You will go to your own people. You will have——" to Lovat's distress his eyes filled with tears—he was highly emotional, like all his sensitive race—" you will have your own son to care for—your English son—the one who will have your land when you are dead."

" My land ?" He had told the boy something of his home in England.

" Someone must have it," Narayan pointed out.

" Well, *you* are my son," said Lovat, half in jest ; but the boy looked at him with horror.

"I could never cross the sea," he said. "The gods would not love me. I could never then become a Brahmin, not in ten thousand years of austerity."

"And do the gods love you, Narayan?"

"Surely they do—a little."

Lovat laughed, and Narayan, seeing that he wanted to be silent, sat obediently in the dust of the empty courtyard of the tumbledown house which they had commandeered as a lodging, and, carefully brushing away the dust with a small branch before he settled himself for meditation, assumed the lotus posture and gave his mind into the keeping of the Mahatma whom they had visited on the mountain.

Lovat sat beside him, less careful of all the small creatures which lived in the dust, and tried to work out the best means of approaching the Emperor to ask for the concessions that he wanted in the name of the Company.

"Narayan," he said at last, "would you do me the favour of following me again to the Emperor's court as my servant? I want to buy English clothes and go in my English name. The Emperor would not receive me in these garments."

Narayan opened his eyes, and smiled at his father.

"Whatever you say, I will do. But do not let the people in this city hear you say that you have money, or very likely they will kill us."

(2)

The Emperor received Lovat, in the name of the Company, in his garden pavilion. The time was early spring, and the air was delightful; flowers were blooming in the gardens, and the Emperor was seated under

a kind of open shelter supported on four red pillars. The imperial scarlet umbrella was not to be seen, but it was easy enough to pick out the Emperor from among his courtiers because he was the only person actually sitting in the shade. Surrounding the pavilion was a wide path of deep blue and white tiles with the flowing patterns loved by the Moslems on them, and beyond this path was a low fence, painted red.

Narayan, richly dressed, walked correctly behind his father bearing presents for the Emperor on a tray. The most beautiful was a pence made of jade and fretted with precious stones and lines of gold. The Emperor welcomed Lovat with his cunning smile, and stretched out his hand for the gifts. In him the usual Moslem courtesy was absent, and having accepted the presents and passed them round for comment among his Afghans and Persians, he pointed suddenly at Narayan.

‘I will have him, too,’ he said. Lovat smiled politely, as though at a subtle joke. The Emperor laughed aloud, and turned and whispered something to the nearest of his courtiers. Lovat waited until the laughter was over, and then observed,

“Have I leave to state my business?” It appeared, however, that the Emperor had arranged an elephant fight, so that, after his favourites had served him with wine out of a jade vessel made like a coffee pot without a handle, Lovat received permission to retire.

“But leave the boy,” said the Emperor.

“Lord,” said Lovat, hoping to appeal to the well-known sense of humour of the Moguls, “it has cost me much money to come into your presence, for your servants are careful of you. Do not, therefore, take

away my servant, since I cannot afford any longer to pay for another."

"I will have him," said the Emperor, feebly obstinate. "Have I not said I will have him? Have I not said I will have him?" he repeated, turning to his court. A diversion was caused at this moment by a messenger who came to say that the elephants were ready to be unloosed as soon as the Emperor should give the word for it. So the Emperor and his suite returned to the precincts of the palace, and Lovat went with them. Narayan, at a sign from his father, slipped through a decorated archway and ran on between high walls until he came to a kind of palace-backyard where a man was playing a stringed instrument. A beggar was sitting listening, and a soldier was leaning on a very long curly bow. Behind were cattle sheds and a stable for camels, and on the other side was an elephant house. In it four great beasts with gold-bound tusks were conversing with one another, probably, Narayan thought, about the chances of their two companions who had been taken away for the fight.

Narayan squatted down to listen to the music. He was not afraid for himself for the simple reason that he had not understood the Emperor's request because it was made in Persian. He had understood his father's quick signal, however, and was prepared to wait indefinitely for Lovat, time being of as little importance to him as to the majority of Indian people.

At the end of an hour the musician went off, and the beggar, to whom Narayan had given the only piece of money he possessed—for he had done all the bribing, in Lovat's name, to get them admitted to the presence

—shuffled away. The soldier, who was supposed to be on guard, straightened up and went away to get his food. Narayan was left with the empty cattle shed, the empty camel shed, and the four elephants. He sat on in the dust until the afternoon. The spring sun was warm. His fine clothes were dusty. He was lost in contemplation of the Infinite.

His meditation was broken abruptly by the sound of somebody running. It was Lovat—he knew that before the runner came out from the high-walled passage. Lovat seized his hand as he rose to his feet.

“Which is the way?” he panted. Narayan, with a boy’s decisive clear-headedness, pulled him towards the other side of the courtyard towards a narrow opening by which the musician and the beggar had left the palace. Two turns past high, grilled windows, and they were at a gateway. It was open. They hurried out.

Narayan did not ask for an explanation, and Lovat did not attempt, in his breathless condition, to give one. They returned to their ruined lodgings, where Lovat took off his English clothes and Narayan’s handsome garments, hid them all, and suggested that they should put on their old clothes and escape from the city in the morning.

“There is very much bad feeling against the Emperor,” he said. “The elephants were fighting, and we were all watching, when an uproar began among some of the Indian nobles, and I saw them fall upon the men whom the Emperor has about him and begin to beat them down. The trouble soon spread, and I thought it best for us to get away. That is a cruel, treacherous man, weak, too, and unmindful

of his obligations, I think. Besides, he wanted me to give you up to him."

"To give me—but I could not be the servant of a Moslem. Perhaps he would want me to eat beef," said Narayan, horrified.

"Well, we have come away now, and there is nothing to be feared."

In this he was wrong. During the night the uproar spread to the city. They were awakened by the flaring of torches in the courtyard, crept back as far as they could among the shadows, held their breaths to make no sound to betray themselves—for they thought the men were robbers—thankfully watched them go, and then heard the babel break out.

"We must go. We must see it!" said Narayan, dancing with excitement. "We must know what is happening at the palace." The same thought seemed to have occurred to a good many people. Against his better judgment, for he had not Narayan's fearlessness, nor his Indian love of tumult and excitement, Lovat went with his son. A great throng surrounding them, they were soon being swept along by the yelling, excited mob, none of whom seemed to know exactly why they were shouting, but all of whom were convinced that something must be afoot. The narrow streets were so congested that when crowds met at a cross-road there was a swaying like that of a great wave meeting another. The crowds, however, although they were wild with excitement and vociferous with speculation, remained, on the whole, good-tempered. People were crushed to death, but not with malice aforethought, and trampled underfoot, but not because of ill-feeling.

The wildest rumours were shouted from one to another, but a good deal of truth was in some of the rumours, as events soon afterwards proved. There was a general crowding towards the palace, and from the grilles which covered the lower windows terrified faces could be discerned in the light of the crowd's torches or the brightness of lamp-lighted rooms, as the servants, concubines, wives, slaves, or whoever the inmates were, peered out at the mob through the apertures and wildly wondered what was their object in coming.

At the second great gateway—the first had been rushed and the mob had flowed over the sentries guarding it as though a great river had engulfed them—four state elephants were drawn up across the archway, and behind them were troops of the household. As soon as the foremost men descried the elephants they tried to hang back, but the crowds behind pushed them forward. In a moment the confusion was the most dreadful thing which Lovat had ever experienced, and it was made worse by the squealing of the elephants, who swung their trunks, trumpeting loudly, half-scared and half-delighted at the thought of the carnage to come. Lovat looked anxiously for his son. He had a second's breathing-space in which to do so while the crowd flung back on itself and he was left confronting the guardians of the inner gateway. He felt a tug at his elbow.

"Come," said Narayan. He followed. There was chance in the black night out of the reach of the torchlight to squeeze down a narrow passage. Down it they ran, soft-padding on bare feet, to get away from the crowds.

"I saw it," said Narayan, sitting down and panting out the words whilst he caressed his narrow feet which had been trodden on several hundred times during the progress to the palace, "when we left last time."

"Good for both of us that you remembered," said Lovat, still getting his breath. "We must not stay here very long. Somebody else may find the way."

They got up, and, turning a corner, found themselves outside the main palace buildings. The palace was three or four stories high, Lovat thought, for at every window there seemed to be a light. Bending low, the better, they hoped, to escape observation from within, they withdrew across a small courtyard, and out, through another archway, into a larger one. A whitish object attracted their attention. They made for it, hoping for a hiding place. It was not a good one. It was another garden pavilion, and in it was a mattress having two pillows. Lovat kicked over a low square table which bore an empty wine vessel and two wine cups. These were of the kind the Moslems used, although it was contrary to their religion to drink wine.

On the mattress was a sticky mess of blood, and a dead man lay there, his head rolled lollingly over the edge, his feet and arms sprawled awkwardly. A dagger was through his heart, and a target shield, with a metal centre and silk-bound cane surround, after the prevailing pattern, lay beside him. Narayan, having bent to scrutinise the corpse, was careful not to touch it.

"It is the man in green—you remember, my father?—he who stood on the right hand of the Emperor when you were received in the pleasure gardens. He was here with a woman when they came

upon him and killed him. My father, you see what must have come to pass? They have killed the Emperor, yes, they have killed him, too, and all the wicked are slain."

His voice was exultant and loud. Lovat hushed him, and bent down over the dead man, listened to find whether by any chance he was not a dead man after all, satisfied himself that whoever had intended to accomplish his death had not failed in resolution or in skill, put his bare foot on the corpse—for the mattress was only a few inches off the ground—jerked out the knife, wiped it on the dead man's garments carefully, picked up the shield and gave it to his son, and said urgently: "Come, we may be watched."

But now they were partly able to protect themselves, and, avoiding the various centres of noisy activity both within and without the palace buildings, they crossed another courtyard and yet another, and entered a farther passage to find that it led directly to the zenana. This was a fact of which they became aware by seeing an Indian take a negro eunuch by the hair and thrust a dagger into his neck below the ear, just as another man caught a girl by the hair and slung her against the wall to get by and capture her mistress.

Lovat and Narayan turned and ran out again, not quite soon enough, actually, except that Lovat tripped the man up as he rushed down the passage. At any rate, they had got into the courtyard among half a hundred or more of maddened soldiers before he had picked himself up. They mingled with these in the hope of being unnoticed in the crowd. So they were, for the crowd was out for loot, and only for lives if the looting was interfered with.

Somewhere, however, vengeance was going on. Afghans with bleeding faces and negroes with horrible wounds, shrieking Persian dandies and Turks with their scimitars broken off half-way and blood oozing clammily from under their jewelled robes, were fleeing before the onslaught of the Moslem Indians whom they had dispossessed for years of the Emperor's favour.

It was nightmare work, escaping from the palace, but Lovat and Narayan managed it more suddenly than they had expected or hoped to do, for the boy gave a cry, as he crossed the wide courtyard, and disappeared from view. Lovat, close behind, saw what had happened. A flagstone had been moved, and below was a gaping hole down which his son had fallen. Regardless of being overheard, he knelt and shouted in Bengali,

"Are you hurt, my son? Where are you?" There was no reply. Lovat stuck the assassin's dagger into the waistband of his loin cloth, lay down on his stomach on the flagstones, and groped with his hand as far down the hole as he could reach. His fingers touched nothing except the slimy sides of the long dark opening, and he thought that it must be a well. He called again, but again he received no answer. Suddenly a voice above him spoke Hindi.

"Fool, he is washed to the tank before this, and, unless he can swim, he is drowned, whoever he is. Dost not know the courtesan's hole in the Courtyard of Too Many Moons?"

The speaker laughed, kicked Lovat in passing, and went on. Lovat scrambled up and glanced about him. Here and there about the courtyard were dark figures

luridly lit by the flames from one of the garden pavilions to which some of the raiders had set light. Nobody noticed him. He clenched his hands, commended his soul to God, caught his breath, and, before he could give himself time to reflect, had jumped down the well. Down he crashed, and mercifully soon was splashing in brackish water. The well was merely a shaft to a stream which flowed underneath the courtyard. The water was deep enough to swim in. The blackness suddenly brightened, the river suddenly widened, and Lovat found himself in the great tank from which the palace and part of the city took its water. Narayan had swum to the bank, and, when his father found him, he was sitting, thin and long-limbed in the dim subtle light of the late-risen moon, wringing the water out of his long black hair. The father and son embraced. At some distance they could hear a confused and muffled roaring from the palace. They rose, without a word, and commenced to run. By the most devious ways—and after getting lost several times, for their knowledge of the city was not extensive—they got back to their tumbledown lodging and hung their wet garments up to dry.

In the morning the city was still in an uproar. It was rumoured that the Emperor was slain; that he was a prisoner; that a night attack was going to be made on the city in favour of a pretender to the throne.

With no idea what to believe, Lovat was certain of one thing—that the best plan he and his son could follow was to leave the city at once and get as far away from it as they could.

They passed out early in the day with a stream of similarly timorous, prudent ones, and left by the

eastern gate to set their faces towards the sacred city of Benares, over four hundred miles distant. They might have gone to the English at Bombay, but both disliked the idea of going to strangers. Lovat had still a fair store of money. They would not lack food on the way. Their chief desire was to fall in with a company of people who were taking the same road, so that they need not be alone, but as far as Benares they travelled by themselves, and, as it happened, nobody troubled them. The roads were bad, and were infested with robbers, extortionate landowners, and tax-collectors, but as they had nothing to sell, and were dressed in turbans and dhotis—Lovat with the money in a bag which was tied round his waist and fell undetectably among the folds of his loose and convenient garment—it did not occur to any of these human wolves that the travellers might be worth robbing.

They were on the march for days, taking food when it was offered, buying it when they were obliged to—which was seldom in a hospitable, kindly land—and before they reached Benares they had begged a passage on a rice boat to work their way down the river. They were to help with the rowing and management of the boat, load up a cargo of rice in the Patna district, and, when the rice had been sold, they were to help load the boat with jute.

The boat was a pulwar. It was based on the lines of a dug-out, and had a square sail. This was on a mast stepped forward of the cargo which was piled up high in bags and was covered over with cotton cloth, lashed down to make it secure. At the stern of the vessel was a high wooden platform from which the

steersman worked his steering oar. On this slow-moving, primitive craft, which had to be rowed when the wind failed or was adverse, Lovat and Narayan spent many happy, sunny, lazy hours, watching the panorama of the Ganges' banks, safely out on the water and content with the succession of unadventurous, restful, easy days.

Neither spoke of Parbati, Lovat because he had little expectation of finding her, and Narayan because he believed implicitly the words of the Mahatma, and felt certain that his mother was with her people, unhappy, perhaps, and despised, but on the way to release and joy, for his father would claim her again and she would be free.

The boat put in at Kasimbazar on the Hooghly, and there they worked hard, with the three men who formed the crew, to unload the rice and carry it to the market, bringing back jute in its place. Then they were given a last meal by the kindly boatmen, left the boat, and walked south from Kasimbazar on the road to Plassey. They had nearly a hundred and seventy miles to walk before they could arrive at Calcutta, and get to Parbati's village.

It took them three days to reach Plassey. They slept where they could—under trees, by the side of small creeks, by the roadside, on villagers' doorsteps—and then spent a night in the city in an empty shop which the owner let them have free of charge because a woman had died there in childbirth. Her ghost, of course, haunted the place, a handsome and lively little ghost, undetectable as a spirit except that its feet were turned backwards.

Narayan believed in ghosts, but Lovat had con-

ducted all the negotiations whilst his son went shopping for food, and so only one of them knew the story and that one did not believe and did not repeat it. They slept soundly, in fact, and, whether the ghost walked or not, they did not see it.

Chapter Twenty



(1)

AT HUGHLI TOWN THE NEWS CAME THAT THE EMPEROR, Farrukh-Siyar, was held prisoner by his Sayyid ministers. Rumour was rife that he was being subjected to barbarous treatment, and that it was likely, at any time, that a successor would mount the throne. That might mean trouble or success for the Company ; it was impossible to know how things would go, and it made Lovat very anxious to get back to Calcutta and give the factors an account of what had been happening in the north.

Between Hughli and Chandernagore they fell in with gipsies, a caste of Kanjas, untouchables, who travelled the riverside highways. These people were black, had thick lips, scowling faces (chiefly from sun glare, not ill-temper), and they carried their household effects on the backs of ponies. Tents were rolled up into many-hued cylinders, and on top were tied cooking pots, water jars, and a number of long bamboos. A good many pariah dogs, with the furtive appearance which gipsy mongrels all over the world acquire, were following the little band, which consisted of three men, five women (three wives and two daughters), a couple of young boys and two little girls. The children were carrying water-pots and other utensils, and two of the men had musical instruments and the third a couple

of cobras and a python. The musical instruments—the first was a bamboo stick to which two gourds were attached, and which carried strings which were plucked to make a soft and plaintive melody, and a drum of the pattern said to have been invented by Shiva was the second—were used to encourage the snakes.

As soon as the nomads saw Lovat and his son they solicited their charity and commenced to give a performance. Lovat laughed and shook his head. Narayan, horrified at the idea of going near eaters of lizards and snakes, kept his distance for fear of pollution. Lovat remonstrated, pointing out that in the gipsies' company they would be safe along the road. Narayan gave in at last, with the bitter remark that he supposed he was outcaste himself, and therefore had nothing to fear from contamination, but it was obvious that he did not like the company.

Progress was slow with the Kanjas because they stopped by the roadside and played their instruments, brought out their snakes and also some performing geckoes, gathered crowds to whom they sold charms against sterility, cures for impotence, medicines to make the dumb to speak, and other remedies. These, among the villagers, had a ready although a not highly profitable sale.

One of the little girls had a jackal pup, a pretty little soft-coated creature, prick-eared, dark-eyed, with the sharply interrogatory expression of a fox-cub. It was obviously a pet, and had been taken by the gipsies when they had killed its mother for food. The dogs were used to it, and did not attempt to attack it.

The Kanjas avoided the towns. Their powdered

birds' tongues, pastes of animal fat, and compounds of hearts and testicles were intended for the country people only. They were afraid of trouble in crowded streets and bazaars, and did not like town-bought food, nor the continual necessity of warning Brahmins—so much more caste-conscious in towns than in the villages—of their contaminating presence.

Lovat discovered that, as they travelled the country that he once had travelled with the Thugs, all his dread of the society came back. He had a hunted feeling all day of people spying on him and reporting upon his appearance and his movements. At night he could not sleep for thinking of Hussein and his elder brother the headman, and of all their murderous company of Kali's devotees and servants. He said nothing of this to Narayan, but the boy knew that he was troubled, and would look at him with such deep and sympathetic affection that Lovat, who felt that merely by having begotten him he had done him a dreadful wrong, for he had robbed him of his Brahmin birthright and of all the prestige that went with it, could hardly endure to meet his eyes.

But they saw and heard nothing of the Thugs, and the little band of poverty-stricken nomads excited little comment along a countryside which was used to these wandering people. It was April, and the weather had not yet come to its summer heat. The rice was springing, and all the land was beautifully green. There was plenty of water and (for Lovat it was a change) sufficient food. Narayan drank milk and ate rice, but would not touch the meat-dishes of the Kanjas. The chief of these was stuffed and spitted jackal.

The men and boys kept watch for signs of tiger-cat. Lovat thought at first that they were afraid of these animals and wanted to avoid their haunts, but he soon discovered that they were anxious to kill them and eat the liver and so inherit the fighting courage of the creatures. They did not kill one, however, whilst Lovat and Narayan were with them.

At nights the gipsies made camp. They pitched their tents, with the long bamboos for tent-poles, near the highroad. This was in case there was any chance to trade whilst they were encamped. Sometimes, if there were jackals about or the villagers seemed well-disposed, they would stay where they were for days. They were utterly happy-go-lucky, living from hand to mouth every day of their lives, making no provision for the future, and seeing the need of none. The men were thin and muscular, and wore their hair long. They were weavers of bead necklaces and armlets made of silver. They wore long skirts—straight pieces of cloth wound about their waists and dropping in careless, graceful folds in the front. Sometimes they wore turbans, or odd pieces of cloth draped over their heads—this gave them a rather pleasing, slightly effeminate appearance—but mostly, at that time of year, they went bareheaded. They had wide mouths, and when they smiled their faces were full of good humour, and all their scowling expression disappeared.

One wore the python regularly as a scarf, holding its head in his hand. Another could imitate the cry of any bird or beast that he had ever heard. He had an amazing repertoire, and used his gift chiefly to attract jackals to the encampment so that the dogs

could kill them. The gipsies themselves believed in the power of their charms and remedies, and upon parting from Lovat and Narayan, a few miles away from Calcutta, they gave Narayan a love potion (not for himself to drink, but to give to his chosen wife to make her love him). Narayan accepted the gift because he had seen that Lovat wished him to do so. It was with regret, in fact, that Lovat parted from these simple-minded, friendly people.

(2)

Parbati's village was easy enough to find, but it was not easy to get news of her. Her family refused to admit Lovat to the house, and as they were wealthy people with a good many servants, it was impossible to force an entrance. The best thing to do was to wait, Lovat thought, and to watch. But they were not left in peace to do this. That evening, after the daily work was done, the headman of the village came with twenty men and chased them out of the place. They had to take to the jungle, or they would not have escaped with their lives.

"What is to be done against such men?" asked Narayan, as they rested in the shade. "And how can we live in the jungle? There are tigers. We shall be killed."

Lovat, who did not believe they would find Parbati, and who hoped (although he would not allow himself to think about it) that she was already dead, made no answer, but, when it was quite dark, led the way back to the village. He knew the house that he wanted, and knew the way thieves got in. He prospected carefully, leaving Narayan on guard, then climbed

the mud wall of the compound and from the top made a hole in the thatch of the roof. A snake slid away from beneath his fingers, making him shudder and almost fall off the wall. He made the hole larger, and climbed through. In a sheath at his waist was the dagger he had taken from the dead man in the palace garden. He dropped through on to the mud floor with a thud and a feeling of having dislocated every bone. He fell forward on to his hands, but was up again in an instant, and crawling round the room in a search for its occupant. His fingers touched a humped body. He knew the man had heard him, for he could hear his frightened breathing. He drew the dagger and held it against the man's cheek, less than half an inch from his ear, and whispered to him in Bengali.

"She is gone," the man whispered back.

"Swear to me by the gods. Is she really gone? Do you mean—is she dead?"

"She is gone on pilgrimage to the southward, lord, to Puri, to be present at the festival of Jaganath's summer procession."

"You are lying to me?"

"No, no. It is true. She is gone. It is to Puri, lord, if you wish to find her, you should go. You may not see her. There are always many people. But there it is that she went."

The sibilant voice ceased. Lovat gripped the man tight and whispered :

"Show me the door. How long is it since she went?"

"Five days, lord. Not an hour more."

Therefore Lovat and Narayan made their way

towards Puri. Boatloads of pilgrims, land cavalcades, groups walking, kept them company, for the time of the great summer festival was at hand, and thousands of people were heading for the south to see the car of Jaganath pass by in procession, and to gaze upon the god if they could. Lovat remembered the Kondh village to which he had come after having left Puri before, and took the precaution of joining a large band of pilgrims so that he and Narayan had plenty of company on the journey. The pilgrims were of all classes. Bullock-carts, riding camels, mounted men and crowds of people on foot, mingled, shouted, sang, chattered, quarrelled, all along the route. As they drew near the city it seemed as though all India was going to Puri for the festival.

To Lovat there was no prospect of finding Parbati among the vociferous crowds when they got to the shrine. He said as much to Narayan, but the boy, who was wildly excited, replied that he knew they would find her. They slept, like nearly everybody else, in the streets, and Lovat recalled very vividly his previous experiences there and his fear of catching some illness from the disease-ridden crowds who had accompanied him. He mentioned this to the boy, but Narayan looked horrified, and said :

“None but the very wicked would be given the plague at a religious festival.”

This belief neither comforted Lovat nor convinced him. He avoided contact with the diseased whenever he could. The morning of the festival came. All night there had been no sleep for anybody. The whole of the populace, thousands strong, were in a state of seething, almost hysterical excitement, and discussion

and argument, prayer and song, and the reiterated and loudly expressed determination of everybody present to be one of the fortunate individuals who would help to pull along the car of the god, kept the night, as well as the weary, wide awake. The general madness thoroughly alarmed Lovat, but filled Narayan with wild joy.

The car on which Jaganath was moved to his summer quarters was an enormous erection of wood, forty-five feet high, mounted on sixteen wheels. It was steered by those who dragged it on its way from one shrine to the other. Competition to haul the car was so keen that many were trampled to death or crushed beneath the wheels in attempting to get places as some of the fortunate draught-animals to the god. Jaganath himself was nothing but an armless trunk of wood, because when Prince Indremena was permitted by Brahma to build a new temple to Vishnu on the site of one which had been buried in the sand, Vishnu promised to come and live in it, but would come in the shape of a tree. Eventually the tree was washed up by the sea, and a woodcarver, Visvakarma, was asked by the Prince to carve from it Krishna's image. The wood-carver stipulated that he would get the carving finished in a night so long as none watched him at work. This was too much for the curiosity of the prince, who hid, and spied upon him. So the wood-carver left his work unfinished, and Jaganath, Lord of the World, remains, in his image at Puri, a headless and armless trunk, but represents, nevertheless, Vishnu in his incarnation as Krishna, and at his festival all castes may eat together, for his holiness transcends all laws and caste distinctions.

All this Narayan told Lovat on the wild night before the wilder morning of the procession. Lovat kept tight hold of his son, and remained at the back of the crowds. Nevertheless, they were swept along with the mob, and he had to let go of the boy and soon lost sight of him. He found him again, but only by working forward through the crowds, using his greater weight and broader shoulders to shove the Indians aside. He was full of anxiety for Narayan, whom he suspected of a desire to help drag the car of the god.

Suddenly, over the usual noises of the festival, a louder cry went up. The car had stopped. Its weight was too great, even for the many who pulled it. Then, in an instant, the story of the Nokkan from Conjeeveram was enacted by a woman he recognised. His wife, Parbati, rushed from the press and flung herself down in the road. At the very same instant the superhuman struggles of the men who were pulling in the shafts got the great car moving again. This time its momentum was relentless. There was a shriek of agony, scarcely heard in the clamour of the crowds, and Parbati, who had refused to perform the sacred act of sati, had made amends to the gods.

When the festival was over and the crowds dispersed, Narayan found Lovat sitting at the side of the road. The priests had taken the body of Parbati. Lovat had not been near it. Narayan sat down beside his father, opened his hand, and said :

"Father, the sacred rice. Eat with me, and let us swear a friendship oath together."

Lovat looked at him in amazement. The boy seemed exalted and in the greatest state of happiness.

His eyes were deep and shining, his hand was steady, his voice was clear and confident. He could not know what had happened, Lovat thought. He nerved himself to explain.

"Your mother, Parbati——" he began. But Narayan interrupted him.

"She is blessed indeed. And everything is *Yajna*, my father. What is all life but sacrifice, and an offering to God?"

(3)

The pilgrims dispersed from Puri, and Lovat and Narayan travelled back to Calcutta. When day came they slept in the shade of some trees near the river and in the late afternoon they entered the city. The money Lovat possessed soon bought them English clothes, and next day they presented themselves at the quarters of one William Cranley, asked for an interview and got it. Lovat recounted some of their doings, and told of the incidents in Delhi. Information had come to the Company that the Emperor, after cruel treatment, had been put to death, and that his successor probably would occupy the Mogul throne for a matter of a few weeks only.

"Our position is insecure. We are at a point in our fortunes when all may be won or lost," Cranley, a man whom Lovat liked, concluded. "We need good men, and men who know the country. The French are not, at the moment, in any position to act as our rivals. The wars in Europe have weakened them too much. But no doubt they will recover lost ground later on, and it has to be admitted that they get on better with Indians, on the whole, than we do."

He looked from Narayan to Lovat and back again. Narayan smiled, and dropped his eyes before the Englishman's gaze.

"Yes," Cranley continued, "the French have made a success of their mixed marriages. More than can be said for most of us. Your son, you say?"

He shook his head, as though he ruminated, and suddenly observed. "It may be a solution, although I am not convinced that it would be good——" He looked at Narayan again. "A handsome boy," he added. Narayan hid his face.

"I am in hopes that he may be received by the Company as an up-country agent later on. He is well-born on his mother's side, speaks Bengali and Hindi, and is healthy," said Lovat.

Cranley nodded, pinching his chin between thumb and first finger, meditating upon Narayan and his accomplishments. He nodded again, as though he had made up his mind.

"You've come with a plan, and you want me to help you. Out with it, friend," he said. "Will you stay with the Company now?"

Lovat shook his head.

"I shall have to go back to England, Cranley, I think. My father is old. There is land, and no heir except Narayan, and, as you know, in England that cannot be. The countryside——" He laughed and held Narayan's sleeve. The boy did not understand, for they spoke in English, and he had forgotten the little he had learned from Lovat in his early childhood. He smiled again, and drew nearer to his father, a gesture which might have seemed effeminate in an English boy, Cranley reflected, but which merely

looked confiding and friendly in Narayan. "Will you be his friend when I'm gone?"

They lodged in the city within the fortified walls for several months, whilst Lovat instructed Narayan in all the Company's affairs. He wanted to arrange his marriage, but held back, half afraid to propose the marriage that he himself considered the most suitable. This was to a girl of mixed blood, daughter of one of the factors, who lived in the quarters assigned to the wives and children of the mixed marriages.

Narayan, however, received the proposal with eagerness, and he and the girl, a child of twelve, not beautiful but without blemish, were married by a Protestant clergyman and then made a Krishna marriage for themselves, as Lovat had done with Parbati.

"Do you like your wife?" Lovat asked, when the marriage was a fortnight old. Narayan smiled. He looked happy; his eyes glowed; his complexion was smooth and clear; he had put on flesh.

"You gave her to me, my father, and therefore I like her," he said. Lovat laughed.

"But do you *like* her?" he persisted. Narayan said:

"I like her. She is a good wife. She is my physical energy. A man's wife does not matter, but only his son."

They parted, he and Lovat, one morning in May.

"But you will not *leave* me," he said, as he held Lovat's hand with both his own. Lovat looked down at the brown fingers, then up at the tear-filled eyes. His own dropped again. He could not meet Narayan's tears. There were many Indians among the people

who came to see the departure of the ship. Lovat could not look at any of them. The oozy shores began to slip by as the ship sailed out towards the sea. Soon they were covered with green jungle. Forests gave place to swamps. The low green marshes, fever-haunted, bird-haunted, crocodile-haunted stretches that faded to the very horizon in a smudge of colour that kept its own identity right to the line of the sky, lay on either side of the ship, a familiar sight to him now. To throw off the dead weight of misery which hung on him like a physical burden he tried to think of England, of the marriage he had made up his mind to contract, of the son he meant to beget to inherit his English lands ; of his own serene old age, safe in a pleasant old house in a Christian country.

They had a brush with pirates when the ship had left Madras, where she put in to pick up passengers, but they outsailed the buccaneers and got clean away to the south. Lovat was almost sorry. He had not realised that he so eagerly anticipated adventure.

Four months later he landed in England, a thin-faced, dark-skinned man, with black eyes which gave not the faintest indication of his thoughts, a melancholy mouth, and a habit of fidgeting as though he found his English clothes uncomfortable. He visited the Company's headquarters, handed in a report from the governor, was received, not affably, but with reasonable courtesy, made an extempore speech in which he described Calcutta, Delhi and Benares, and was dismissed, without cordiality, to find lodging in London until a coach went to his home.

He did not write to his father, and was not surprised to hear in the village that he was dead. He visited

the grave and looked at the inscription in the church before he walked up to the house.

Everything looked just the same except for the quiet-faced woman, past middle age, who sat in his mother's chair and rose from it to greet him with his name.

"Lovat ! Dear Lovat ! Margaret will be so glad."

He had forgotten Margaret ; not so much forgotten her, perhaps, as left her out of his calculations entirely. She was married ; had been married for years. He would meet her, he had supposed, and her husband—the usual course of country events would ensure that there would be occasions at which they and he would be present, that was to be expected. But—Margaret will be so glad !

"What has happened ?" he asked, later on. The husband had been thrown from his horse, and had broken his back. There were no children. Margaret had not married again, although, people thought, there had been offers.

"She has been waiting for you," the quiet-faced woman said, and Lovat was sure it was true. They were married six months later in the church beyond the river, and he lay beside her on his wedding night and thought of the Indian Parbati. On the third day after his marriage he wrote to Narayan, in the care of his acquaintance, William Cranley, to whom he wrote at the same time, begging him to read to the boy his father's letter.

He spent most of the day out of doors, finding interest in the home farm, in the production and the marketing of goods, in the breeding of stock and the needs and life of the village. He went to church twice

every Sunday and had the vicar up to the house to discuss—to the vicar's amazement—aspects of Christian belief.

Once cows broke through from a field and trampled the flower-beds. He found himself shouting angrily and half-hysterically at the boy who was trying to drive them off. He gave up hunting, and became unpopular in consequence. They had a plague of earwigs and he refused the servants leave to try to deal with it, stating in round terms that he would not take life in any form. Margaret was first astonished and then put out. She then became nervous on the score of killing creatures, so quickly does a superstition take hold. Lovat observed this, took his prejudices in hand, shot rabbits and rooks, went fishing, ate tremendously of beef, and did his best to lay what he thought was a bogey.

Margaret's spirits improved and so did her health. One day when Lovat returned from Half Acre Corner, where the men were taking in the hay, she told him the news which he had been hoping to hear. He set about inviting all his neighbours, friends and relatives to the christening.

The child was born in the following February and to Lovat's intense delight was a beautiful boy. He sat by the side of his wife and gazed at the red-faced, crumpled-looking child.

"How long have I been here now?" was his question as soon as Margaret was up again and a nurse had been found for the baby. His wife frowned in recollection, and then answered:

"It is less than two years since you landed."

"Two years! Ah, yes," he said. He wrote again

to Narayan, to tell him of his stepbrother's birth. He had had two letters from his son, both in English, and written by Cranley. Narayan, too, was going to have a son. He was sure it would be a son. His wife thought so, too. He was rich enough to take a second wife, but he thought his wife would not like it. What did Lovat think? If his son lived, he himself could give up the Company's work and become an ascetic and find God. If he was going to do that after his son was born, was it worth while to take a second wife? His dear father must advise him; he would know.

Lovat wrote back long and affectionately. His heart yearned for Narayan; for his long silences, his beauty and his smile; his naturalness, simplicity and goodness. After he had sent off the letter he spent more time than ever on the farm; took a keen, unmercenary joy and pride in the stock, the crops, and the increase; surprised his hinds and shocked his neighbours by criticising the three-field system and advocating more careful cultivation. He would sample the rich earth, picking it up by handfuls and casting his compass round with it as though it were holy water. They thought his head had been slightly affected by sunstroke, and his brain slightly addled by much acquaintance with Indian speech and thought.

He went back, without much warning, when his little boy was two. Margaret wept, and the little boy bellowed for his daddy.

"Shiva's little bull," said Lovat, and kissed him fondly, but did not once look back when the last good-bye had been said. Margaret said she would join him as soon as the child could be left. He should go away to school, she said, and his great-aunt would

take care of him in the holidays. Lovat did not believe her, and did not want her to join him.

"I shall come again later on—later on," he said.

It was easy enough to get back. Things were not going too well, and experienced men were scarce. The Company commissioned him gladly, and a ship of theirs was sailing almost as soon as he could manage to get to the embarkation stage.

During the long, uncomfortable voyage he was alternately eating his heart out with impatience, or filled with a blissful peace of mind. He lay on his bunk in the tropic nights, the water rushing, the ship's timbers groaning and squealing, the wind whining through the tackle and the constellations wheeling and changing overhead, and remembered how it would all be when he got back. He thought of the little villages, with their dark and dreadful innocence, their violence and their simplicity; the headman and the watchman, the people, their superstitions, their ignorance, lust and fear; their childish kindnesses; the true hospitality of the indigent and the untravelled. He thought of the dust and the glare; of the squalor and the equally inexpressible wealth; of weather and water; crops, cattle, festivals and fairs; of family and religious ceremonies, of the ever-present, yearly occurring, inescapable dread of famine; of money owed to the moneylender and services owed to the gods. He thought of the gods themselves; mortal, lustful, vengeful; crude, irresponsible, unkind; of Shiv and his thousand names; of the sacred syllable Om; of saints and charlatans, rogues, holy mendicants, miracles. . . .

The ship turned to enter the Hooghly. He saw

the sprawling greenness, the caterpillar heart of the swamps. He smelt the rotting river-mouth smell of decaying vegetation and the unmistakable stench of crocodile. The sun beat down and blistered the wood-work of the ship. He was stewing with heat. The deep brown water rolled by. Birds flew about the rigging—Indian birds. He remained on deck, even in the fiercest heat, hungrily watching for villages on the bank. The ship kept fairly well over, and now and again a flight of steps was evidence of a temple. Sometimes he thought he could see some people bathing. That night there were funeral pyres with their dull, red, sacrificial glow.



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